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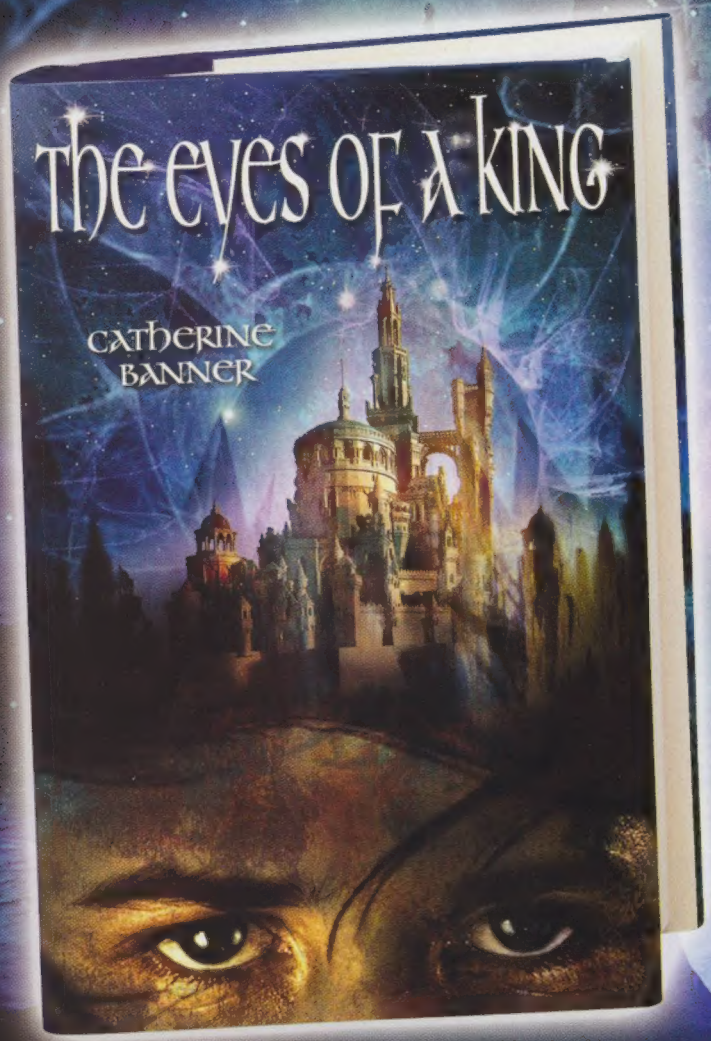

In the war-torn dictatorship of Malonia, fifteen-year-old Leo North finds a book with a strange power—a book that reveals the story of two teens from a parallel universe, whose lives are inextricably linked to Leo's world.

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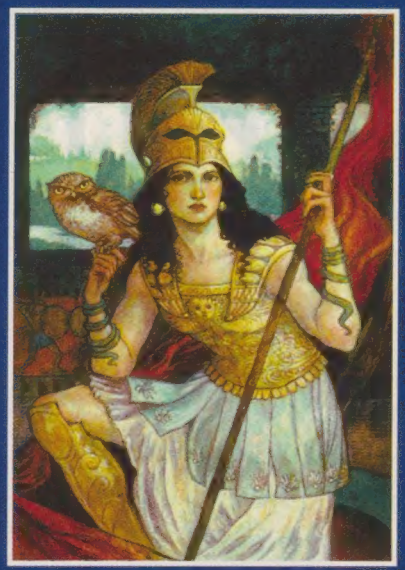

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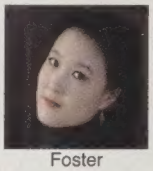
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EUGIE FOSTER calls home a mildly haunted, fey-infested house in Metro Atlanta that she shares with her husband, Matthew, and her pet skunk, Hobkin. Her publication credits number over 100 and include stories in *Interzone, Cricket, Cicada, Orson Scott Card's InterGalactic Medicine Show,* and anthologies *Best New Fantasy* (Wildside Press), *Heroes in Training* (DAW Books), and *Best New Romantic Fantasy 2* (Juno Books). Visit her online at www.eugiefoster.com.

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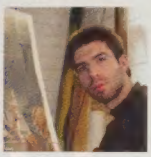
After too many years of employment in haunted offices (including long stints as a temp— "But dammit, I was a good temp!"), **PENI R. GRIFFIN** has quit the corporate world as of 2007. As God is her witness, she'll never have a day job again! Her husband, the cats, and Peni live in a fully owned and almost operational historic house in San Antonio, where every office building and residence worth its salt has a spook. Her most recently published book, *11,000 Years Lost,* dates from 2004 and her last *RoF* story was "The Singers in the Tower."

WAY JENG is a resident of Illinois, trained philosopher, and generally nice guy, but for better or worse he is not Neil Gaiman.


Palumbo

DAVID PALUMBO is a freelance illustrator currently living and working in Berkeley, California. He was raised around art all through his childhood and has always had a particular interest in comic books and science fiction and fantasy illustration. After graduating from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art in 2004, he has been painting full time and is currently providing artwork primarily for book covers and gaming cards, as well as showing occasionally with a couple galleries in the Philadelphia/DC area.

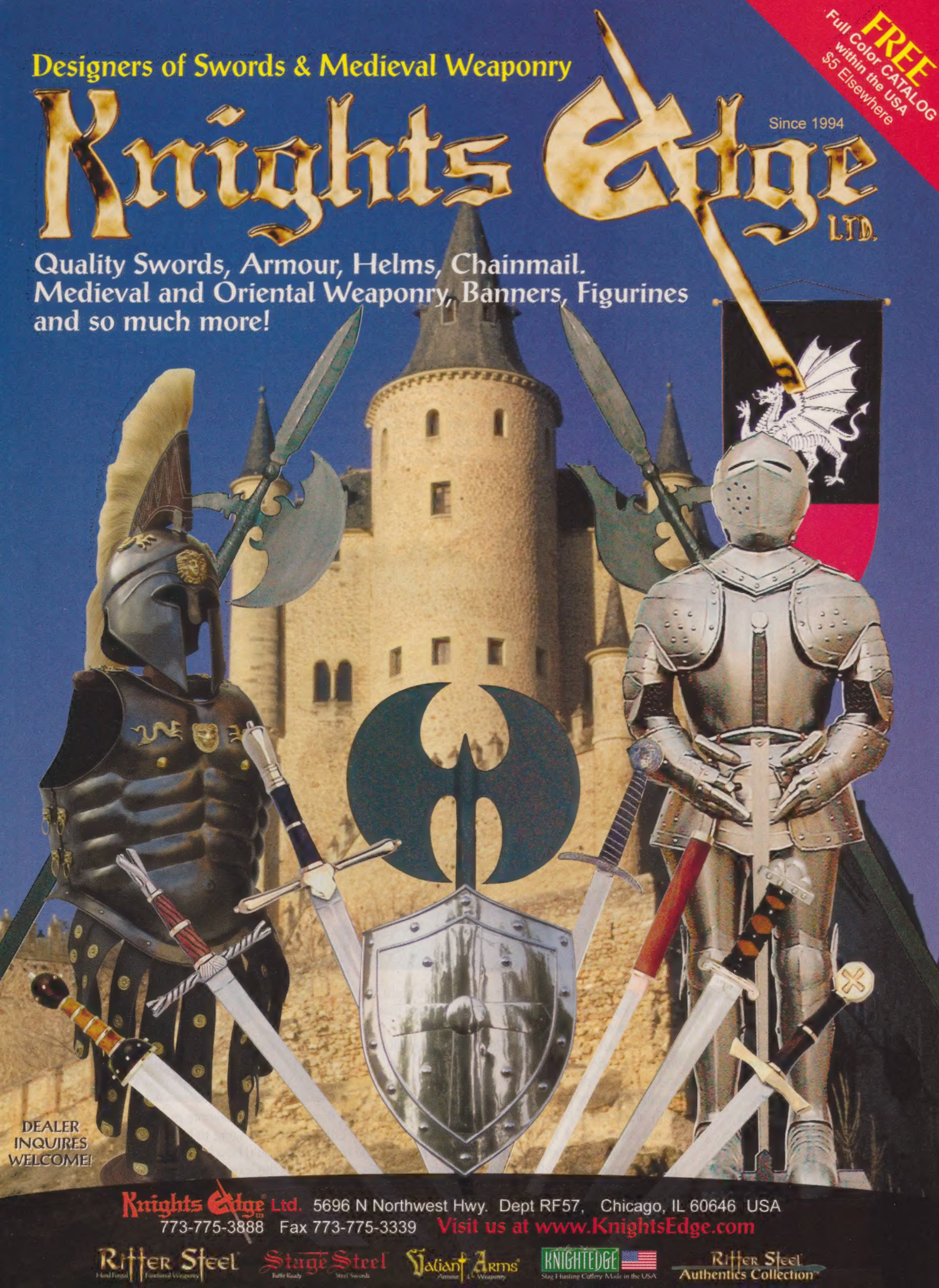
CARRIE VAUGHN has published more than two dozen short stories in various magazines and anthologies. Most of her work over the last couple of years has gone into her series of novels about a werewolf named Kitty who hosts a talk radio advice show for the supernaturally disadvantaged. The fourth, *Kitty and the Silver Bullet,* came out earlier this year. She lives in Boulder, Colorado. Visit her at www.carrievaughn.com.

Pierandrei

NATALIA PIERANDREI, better known as "nati," is a traditional illustrator based in Italy where she has lived for most of her life. From her earliest memories, Nati has always had a passion for art. The idea of taking a blank piece of paper and knowing that anything is possible has made her work a collage of styles and influences: Art Nouveau, European graphic novels, gothic and classical fantasy themes, and a strong influence from Japanese anime and manga. In fact during her college years she spent almost two years in Tokyo and that's the reason she loves anything related to Japan and its culture. As a mainly self-taught artist, she thinks that practice is the key to improvement and refinement. Observing how things look, how light falls on them, what shapes and forms they take, and then practicing drawing all of that has always been the best school. She predominantly uses markers with a painting style that often utilizes mixed techniques like watercolor, colored pencils, and soft pastels. Nati's art has appeared in various art books, the most notable being *The Art of Faery* and *The World of Faery* by Paper Tiger. Her most recent project is *Precious Things,* a book completely dedicated to her artwork that will be released in France in spring 2008 by Le Calepin Jaune Editions. Visit Nati's website at www.nati-art.com.

Williams

LIZ WILLIAMS is the daughter of a conjuror and a Gothic novelist, and currently lives in Brighton, England. She has a Ph.D. in philosophy of science from Cambridge, and her anti-career ranges from reading tarot cards on Brighton pier to teaching in Central Asia. Her novel *The Ghost Sister* was published in 2001. Further novels include *Empire of Bones, The Poison Master, Nine Layers of Sky,* and *Banner of Souls.* Liz had had over 50 short stories published in *Asimov's, Interzone, Realms of Fantasy,* and *The Third Alternative.*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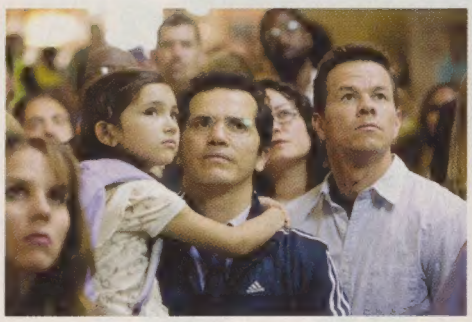
By Resa Nelson

Some very nice people face some R-rated, hardcore scary stuff in *The Happening.*

M. Night Shyamalan's (*The Sixth Sense, The Village*) new film, *The Happening,* hits theaters on June 13 (20th Century Fox). Mark Wahlberg (*The Departed*) stars as Elliot, a high school science teacher. One day, inexplicable events strike the East Coast of the United States. At first, these events are believed to be a terrorist attack in the form of toxins released in the air that cause people to commit suicide. But it's soon discovered that this is no terrorist attack. Elliot, his wife, and their friend race to discover a way out of the affected region and find a way to safety.

"What I wanted to do was to make a serious, serious paranoia movie so that when you come out, you're twitching," Shyamalan says. "All I have to do is say a word, and you'll start getting nervous and you won't know why or your stomach gets tight. I want to cause a reaction that's an experience that's now tattooed to you."



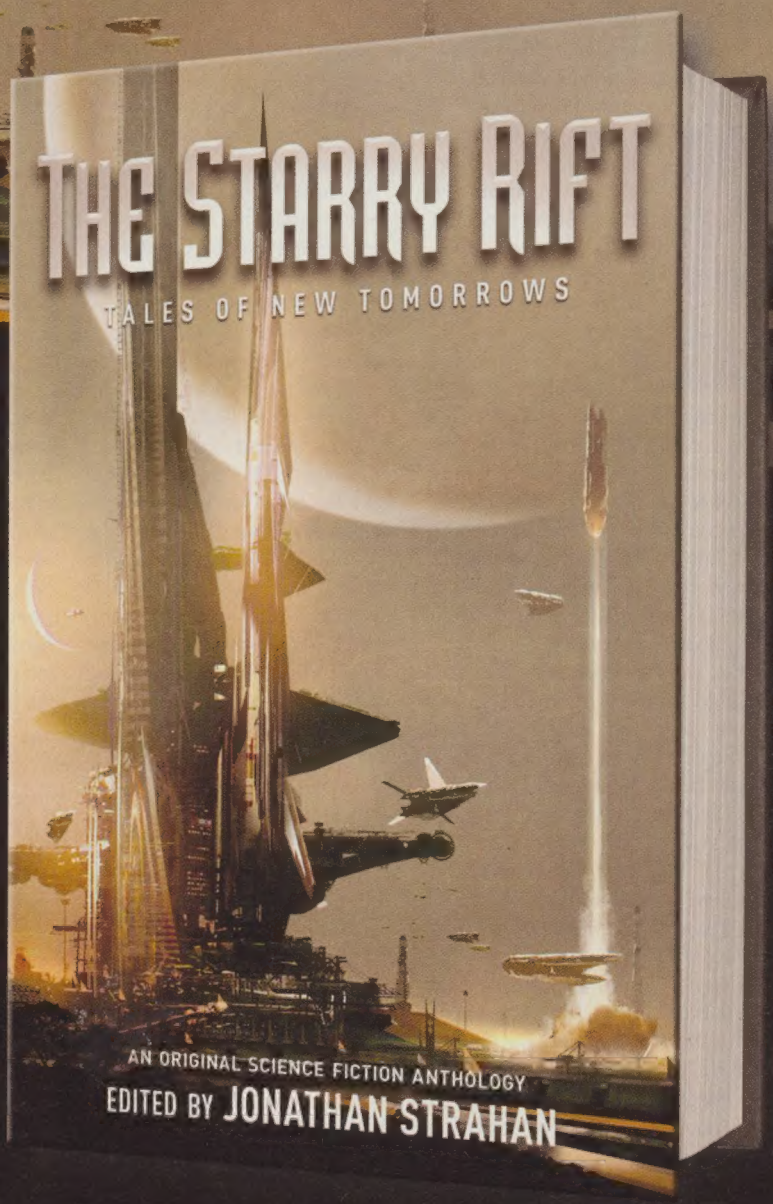
Photos courtesy of 20th Century Fox

Science teacher Elliot Moore (Mark Wahlberg) and his wife Alma (Zooey Deschanel) try to make their way to safety. Their friend Julian (John Leguizamo) is equally baffled by the disastrous events.

Shyamalan's hope is that *The Happening* will be to this decade what Hitchcock's *The Birds* was to the 1960s. At the request of the studio, *The Happening* is his first R-rated movie, an idea that he initially shied away from. But when Shyamalan considered some of his own favorite movies—in addition to his collection of Hitchcock movie posters, the only other posters hanging in his home are of *Jaws, The Exorcist,* and *The Godfather*—he realized that *The Happening* would be a better movie if he pushed the envelope and made it more gruesome. But what really makes the movie work is the appeal of the main characters and the danger that they face.

"The balance between the relationship and the event was beautiful," Shyamalan says. "Along the way, you fall in love with them. Along the way, their concerns become your concerns. That the movie allowed itself to have that heart at the center—I'm very, very pleased with."

TALES OF NEW TOMORROWS FROM TODAY'S MOST COMPELLING WRITERS



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Although Shyamalan was every critic's darling in 1999, his films since then haven't been praised as highly. Maybe it's a good idea to keep in mind that some of Hitchcock's best movies—like *Vertigo*—were panned as duds when first released. Today, *Vertigo* is considered a masterpiece.

Shyamalan came up with the idea for *The Happening* during post-production on his last film, *Lady in the Water*. He had already started working on the beginning phases of the movie he thought he'd make next. But then *The Happening* happened. "I suddenly got this idea as I was driving to New York to finish the mix on *Lady*, and it all came like boom-boom-boom-boom-boom. It was a cascade of this is how it begins and this is where it ends and this is what happens. And I thought, Wow—that is cool."

So Shyamalan switched gears. He dropped the movie he thought he was going to make. As a director who knows what he needs in actors, one of his most important tasks was casting. Even though Donnie Wahlberg played a small but critical role in *The Sixth Sense*, he had nothing to do with his brother Mark being cast in *The Happening*. What convinced Shyamalan that Wahlberg was the right man to play Elliot was a role the actor had played in 1999's *Three Kings*, an antiwar movie about four American soldiers at the end of the Gulf War who get their hands on a map to stolen Kuwaiti gold bullion worth millions. The soldiers strike out to steal it, and Wahlberg's character is captured and tortured.

"I hired him for the scene in *Three Kings* when he's talking to his wife on the phone," Shyamalan says. "He's being tortured and he finds a cell phone, calls his wife up and she starts complaining [without understanding he needs help]. The way he conveyed the humor and the pathos of that character and also the

Batman is back this summer!

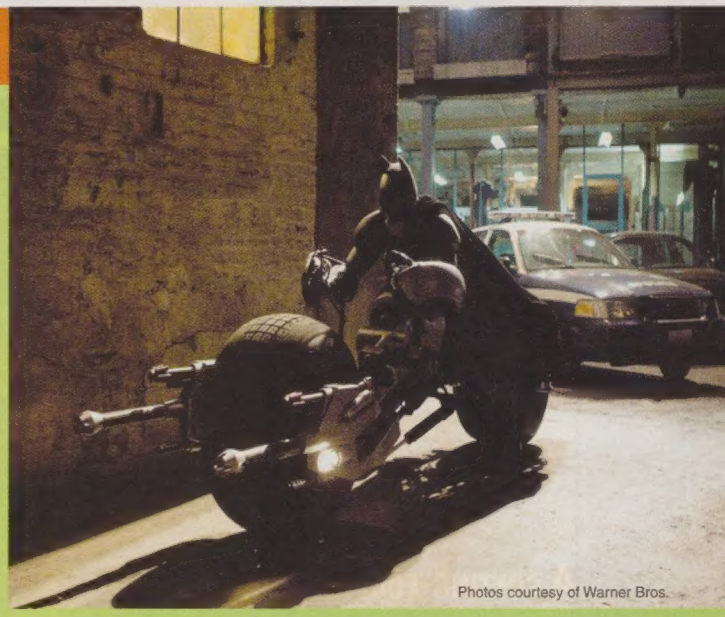
The Dark Knight, the second film in the reinvented Batman series, opens nationwide on July 18 (Warner Bros.). Unlike previous Batman franchises, this series focuses on the early years of the superhero's career. In other words, don't expect to see characters like Robin or Batgirl because in this time frame they're likely to be young children, if they've been born at all. On the flip side, audiences are treated to the origins of Batman's foes.

The Dark Knight appears to pick up where *Batman Begins* left off: at the end of the first film, Lieutenant Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman of the *Harry Potter* films), who will someday become Commissioner) tells Batman (Christian Bale of *Batman Begins* and *Reign of Fire*) that there could be a downside to his presence in Gotham City because people may become too dependent upon him. Gordon reveals that a suspect has murdered two people and has shown a flair for the dramatic. Gordon hands the suspect's calling card to Batman as evidence: the joker from a deck of cards.

In *The Dark Knight*, Batman teams up with Gordon and District Attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart of *Thank You for Smoking*, *No Reservations*) to rid Gotham City of the organized crime that overruns the metropolis. Crime bosses rule the city, but Batman is determined change that fact by working with Gotham city government. Enter The Joker (Heath Ledger of *Brokeback Mountain*), a psychopath with ideas of his own. The Joker is a serial killer, and he chooses interesting victims. Ledger's death earlier this year generated reports that his performance as *The Joker* is among his best work. Unlike Caesar Romero's appropriately campy take on The Joker on TV's *Batman* in the 1960s or Jack Nicholson's joyfully twisted performance of the same role in 1989's *Batman* (directed by Tim Burton), Ledger's performance is realistically dark and disturbing.

Screenwriter Jonathan Nolan (*The Prestige*) is the brother of *The Dark Knight*'s director, Christopher Nolan (*The Prestige* and *Memento*, which is based on a short story written by Jonathan). According to IGN.com, when Jonathan Nolan wrote the script for *The Dark Knight*, he didn't find it difficult to get under The Joker's skin. The real challenge for Nolan was to get The Joker out of his head once the script was done. "It will take months and months of therapy to get The Joker out of my head," Jonathan Nolan said. Last year, while the film was still being shot, Christopher Nolan described Ledger's performance as "brilliant" and "indescribable." The director said, "He's taking it and running with it." Oldman said, "[Ledger] will knock everyone out of the ballpark."

Fans can also look forward to seeing the origin of the villain Two-Face. Harvey Dent develops both a friendship and a rivalry with Bruce Wayne in *The Dark Knight*. Part of this complicated relationship is driven by their rumored rivalry for the affection of Rachel Dawes, resulting in a love triangle. The friendship and rivalry between Dent and Wayne has been called the backbone of this movie. However, half of Harvey Dent's face is disfigured when a criminal throws acid at him, which ultimately results in Dent developing a split personality. One side of Dent's personality wants to keep fighting crime, and the other is all too willing to join the wrong side of the law. He flips a coin to decide whether to follow the path of good or evil, and—now known as Two-Face—he joins the rank of villains.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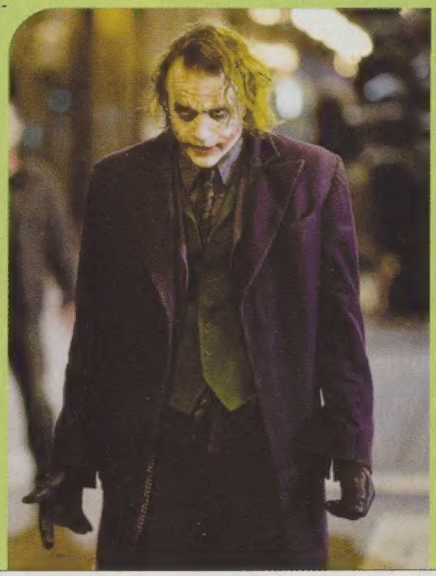
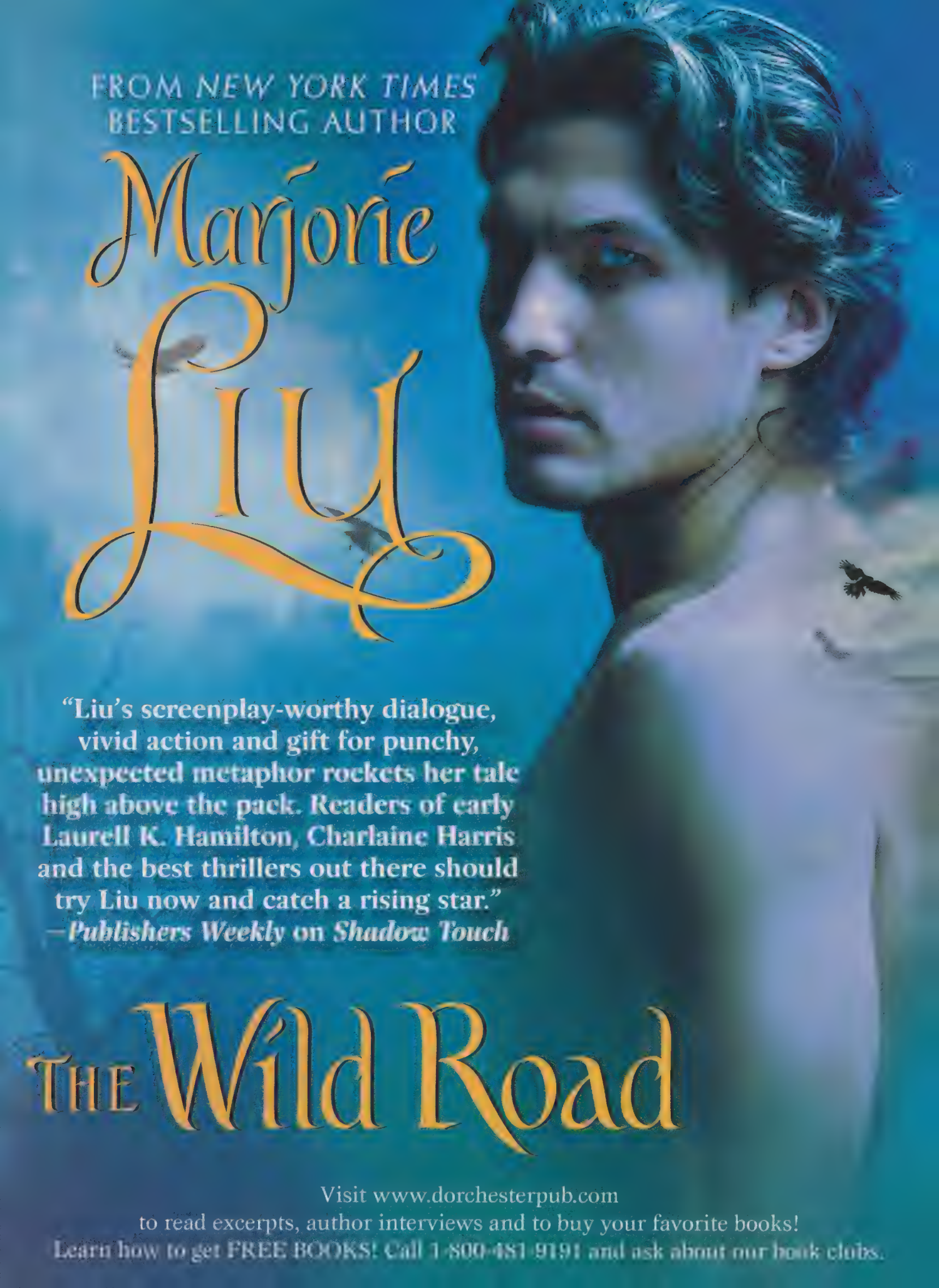


In an interview with MTV.com, Eckhart said, "Batman is a complex character, and Two-Face comes a little bit from the same world. But [at the same time] he's apart from it. I'm looking for the tension between the two, the similarities between the two. I want to find what's similar to Batman and then find what's opposite to him."

Batman Begins focused heavily on establishing Batman's origin and the world of Gotham City. In *The Dark Knight* there is a stronger emphasis on Bruce Wayne's interest in detective work and criminology. He also creates and tests new equipment, including a new suit and the Bat-Pod, a high-tech motorcycle.

Returning actors include Michael Caine as Alfred and Cillian Murphy as Dr. Jonathan Crane (aka The Scarecrow, the villain who disappears at the end of *Batman Begins*), but Maggie Gyllenhaal (*Donnie Darko*) replaces Katie Holmes as Rachel Dawes.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Fun with *Kung Fu Panda* and *WALL*E*

Look for two promising animated comedies this summer: *WALL*E* from Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios (*Ratatouille*, *The Incredibles*, *Finding Nemo*) and *Kung Fu Panda* from Dreamworks Animation (the *Shrek* movies)

Opening on June 6, *Kung Fu Panda* tells the story of Po (voiced by Jack Black of *School of Rock*), a panda living in ancient China. Although he works in his family's noodle shop in the Valley of Peace, Po is a slacker. He's also a fan of Kung Fu fighting. His life changes forever when he's chosen to fulfill an ancient prophecy.

Po travels to the Jade Palace, resting high atop Jade Mountain, which overlooks the Valley of Peace. Built 900 years ago by citizens of the Valley of Peace, Jade Palace honors the master who created Kung Fu as a way for the strong to protect the weak. Suddenly, Po finds himself studying by the sides of his Kung Fu idols, known as the Furious Five—Tigress (Angelina Jolie of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*), Crane (David Cross of TV's *The Colbert Report*), Mantis (Seth Rogen of *Knocked Up*), Viper (Lucy Liu of *Kill Bill*) and Monkey (Jackie Chan of *Rush Hour*)—and led by the great Master Shifu (Dustin Hoffman of *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium*). When threatened by a dangerous snow leopard, Tai Lung (Ian McShane of TV's *Deadwood*), Po must step up to the plate and become the Kung Fu fighter he's always longed to be.

Opening on June 27, *WALL*E* is about the last person on Earth. Except, in this case the last person is a robot named *WALL*E* (short for Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-Class). Set hundreds of years in the future, humankind has abandoned Earth and left robots behind to clean up the mess. Every day, *WALL*E* dutifully acts as a janitor for Earth, collecting knick-knacks along the way. He isn't just a robot. He's intelligent, curious, and playful—not unlike Luxo, Jr., the animated flexible lamp that has become Pixar's icon.

But one day something literally comes in out of the blue. A spaceship lands on Earth, and a streamlined robot named EVE glides out of it. EVE is a search robot sent by humans, and her mission is to determine if it's safe for people to return to the planet. For *WALL*E*, it's love at first sight, although EVE's weapons soon have him cowering in his locomotion belts. Love wins and the two robots hook up. But when EVE learns that *WALL*E* has unwittingly stumbled onto a secret that could save humanity's home, she races back to her masters with that information. Determined to win back his true love, *WALL*E* finds a way to follow EVE across the

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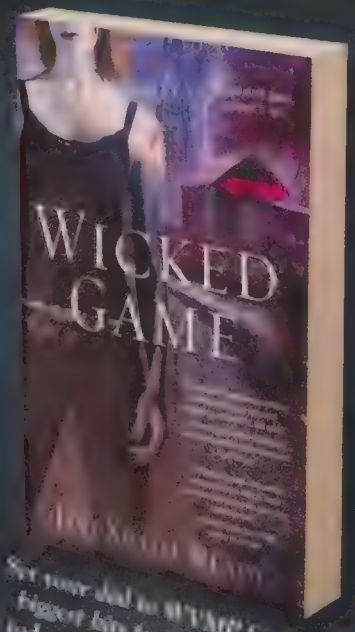

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From the author of *Night Birds' Reign* and *Crimson Fire*

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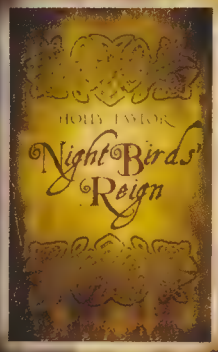

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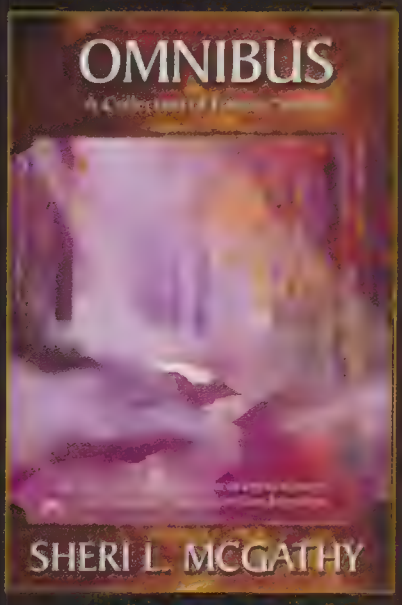
"And so," whispered the old Storyteller. "The tale begins...."

NEW Fantasy From

Sheri L. McGathy



OMNIBUS

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Four timeless tales from Sheri L. McGathy, together in one collection: THE BIRTH OF SPRING, THIEF OF DREAMS, THE ANCIENT ONE and WHERE LIES BEAUTY

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frustration—I was like, this is the guy that I want at the center of this nightmare.

"When you're going so hardcore with the scary stuff, to have a likable guy to juxtapose against that—it becomes such a likable movie because of him. If you pick somebody really dark, it would be unbearable. Also, Zooey [Deschanel of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, TV's *Tin Man*, cast as Elliot's wife] is extremely likable. Literally, that was my goal: find the two most likable people to throw into this nightmare."

Shyamalan claims that of all the movies he's made, *The Happening* has been the easiest to direct. But he says that his biggest challenge has been figuring out how to strike the right balance between not letting *The Happening* take itself too seriously while striving to keep moviegoers on the edge of their seats. He gives an example: imagine you're playing checkers with Shyamalan. During the course of the game, you sense something peculiar is going on in a nearby room that's out of sight. You hear strange noises and the hair on the back of your neck stands up on end. All the time you're playing checkers with Shyamalan, he's carrying on this light-hearted conversation with a hint of glee in his voice: "I'm sure that sound in the other room is nothing. Don't worry about it. It's absolutely fine. Let's just keep playing checkers—it's fine. Oh, I've got a great move. Don't worry about that sound—it's fine. I'm sure that wasn't a scream."

Anyone who loves horror movies knows no character should ever go in the basement. Shyamalan strives to keep his characters from going in the basement for as long as possible. He believes it's important to delay any earnest

Live-Action Movies

On June 13 **The Incredible Hulk** promises to keep the summer blockbuster season in high gear, but don't confuse this movie with 2003's *Hulk* (directed by Ang Lee), which failed in the eyes of critics and moviegoers alike. Universal Pictures is branding this new version as a "reboot" that's intended to freshen up the franchise and give it another shot at becoming a successful series. This time around, Edward Norton (*The Illusionist*) stars as mild-mannered scientist Bruce Banner, whose body chemistry is changed after exposure to gamma radiation that was strong enough to kill him. Whenever he loses his temper, he transforms into a raging, gigantic green monster.

Bruce is determined to find a cure for himself, and he travels around the world in search of one. At the same time, he must evade being captured by the military, which is nipping at his heels.

General Thunderbolt Ross (William Hurt of *Vantage Point*, *Mr. Brooks*) believes that Bruce is the military's property and they have every right to exploit his powers for their own purposes. Bruce takes refuge in northern Mongolia, but when he changes into the Hulk, he's captured by the Russian government. Their scientists collect DNA from the Hulk and use it to create their own version of the Hulk, called the Abomination (played by Tim Roth of *Funny Games*). When the Hulk escapes, the Russian scientists send the Abomination to stop him so that the U.S. won't learn about the Russians' illegal experiments.

Also from Universal Pictures, **Wanted** opens on

action of investigating anything that seems off-kilter, because Shyamalan knows that would cause some people in the movie theater to cross their arms and shake their heads in disbelief. He explains, "But if you keep on taking [the audience's] position of, 'That's silly. That's not it. That's nothing. This is a joke. I don't believe this.' Then they get disarmed."

Shyamalan is well aware that some people love his work and others hate it. He takes the stand of an independent filmmaker who is committed to making the movies he wants without caving in to corporate pressure to deliver blockbusters.

"I'm very dogmatic to what I believe in," Shyamalan says. "For example, *Unbreakable* is one of those gigantic ideas. If I did it from the point of view of 'Oh, my dad is really Superman!' it would make $800 million—but I did not want to make that point of view." Instead, Shyamalan chose to tell the story of *Unbreakable* from the point of view of a man gradually realizing that he has unusual strength—like a superhero. Because Shyamalan chose to tell the story in a specific way and from that specific point of view, it was a less commercial movie. (In U.S. theaters alone. *Unbreakable* made about $95 million, approximately one-third of the $293 million hauled in by *The Sixth Sense*.)

"I like very intricate, complicated movies," Shyamalan continues. "And so I as a storyteller—and the audience, as well—go on complicated rides. And I'm OK with pushing the audience to the very limit of what they can accept in terms of complication. The body of work will reflect my taste rather than one particular movie."

June 27. Based on the graphic novel by Mark Millar, *Wanted* tells the story of 25-year-old Wesley Gibson (James McAvoy of *Atonement*), a slacker whose boring life consists of being ignored by his girlfriend and yelled at by his boss. But when his father is murdered, everything changes. A woman named Fox (Angelina Jolie of *Beowulf*) introduces Wesley to a secret society of fighters who train him as an assassin. This society, called The Fraternity, believes that death orders are a matter of fate—based on their unusual spiritual beliefs—and their job is to carry out those orders. Wesley begins to question The Fraternity and must choose between their beliefs and his own conscience.

Fans of Jules Verne will have the opportunity to immerse themselves in a movie based on one of his most famous novels. **Journey to the Center of the Earth** (New Line Cinema and Walden Media) is the first live-action digital 3-D movie, opening on July 11. Brendan Fraser (*The Mummy*) stars as modern-day science professor Trevor Anderson, who's familiar with Verne's novel about a lost world hidden below Earth's surface. In fact, Trevor believes that everything Verne wrote about in that lost world is real, even though his beliefs make him a laughingstock among his peers. Trevor is convinced the legend of a land untouched by time has merit, and that previous explorers have gone missing in search of it. In search of his own missing brother, Trevor goes on an expedition to Iceland with his teen nephew Sean (played by Josh Hutcherson of *Bridge to Terabithia*) where they're led by local guide Hannah (Anita Briem of TV's *The Tudors*).

While exploring caves, they find themselves on a fragile floor that shatters beneath their feet. They plummet deep below the Earth's surface, land in water, and discover the world that Verne described, complete with towering mushrooms, huge Venus flytraps, and dinosaurs. While the exterior scenes were shot in Canada and Iceland, the underground world is made up of photo-realistic digital environments, requiring revolutionary new filmmaking techniques.

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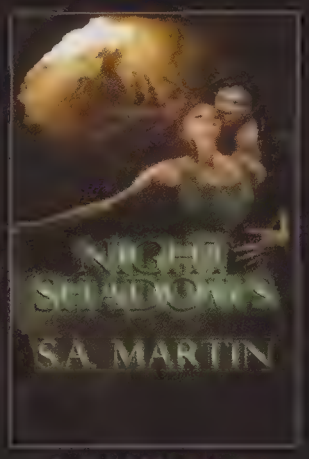

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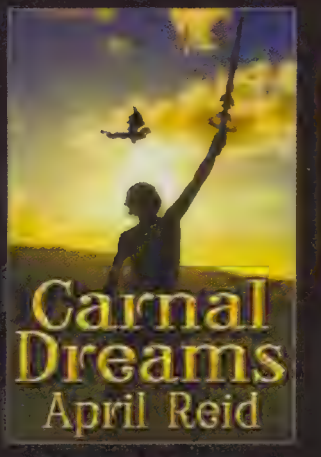

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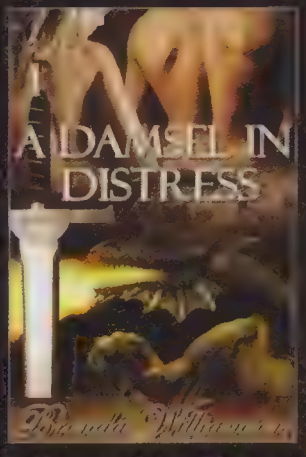

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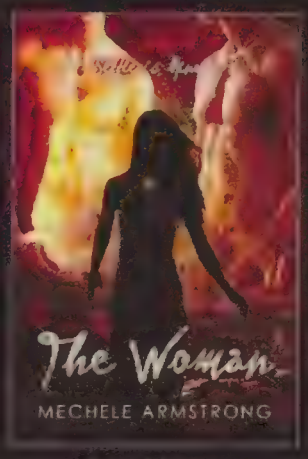

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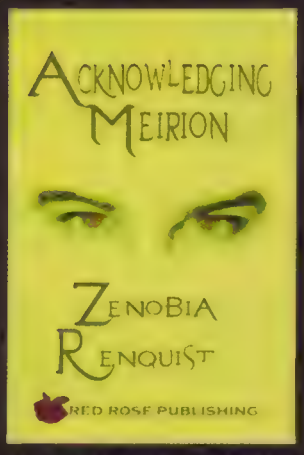

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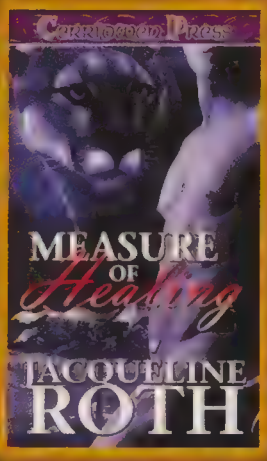

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By Terri Windling

The idea of hearth and home permeates fairy tales, folklore, and mythology.

Recently I packed up and sold the house where I'd lived for many years: a 16th-century, thatch-roof cottage in a small English village on Dartmoor. The cottage was hugely significant to me, for I'd lived there much of my adult life, but in the house's own story, spanning four centuries, my two decades were a drop in the bucket. The cottage felt strange on my last evening there, emptied of furniture and books; only the goblin murals on the kitchen walls remained of the life I'd known there. I lit a last fire in the ancient stone hearth ... and when the flames had burned down low, I put hot coals into an old tin can, following a Dartmoor folk custom. The coals would be used to light a fire at my new abode, just down the street—which would bring me luck, according to some legends, and allow any fairies that lived in the hearth to move along with me, according to others. I left the cottage, locked the door, and pushed the house keys through the door's mail slot. They hit the floor inside, and the sound marked a chapter in my life that had ended.

The witch's house appears to be a haven for the starving and neglected Hansel and Gretel in Ian Penney's colorful and imaginative illustration.

Used courtesy of Ian Penney. www.ianpenney.co.uk

I'd been anticipating this move for over a year, and was making the change for positive reasons, so the depth of the loss I felt in that moment was entirely unexpected. It wasn't just the cottage I was leaving behind, but the person I'd been there for so many years ... and the future I'd always imagined I'd have growing old under its roof. Living in a magical, ancient house had become part of my self-identity. Who was I now, without that familiar backdrop of grinning goblins and old oak beams, of Morris fabrics and medieval tapestries? What remained of me, with the world that I'd woven around me stripped away? For the better part of two decades, my concept of "home" had been solid, unchangeable, built literally of granite. Now life had taken an unexpected turn and I was moving to temporary digs, my belongings packed up in storage, my work/living needs pared down to essentials. Without the weight of that old stone house, my life felt curiously unmoored ... but also full of narrative possibility as I waited for its next chapter to begin ...

In this time of upheaval, I began to think about the hold that our homes can have on us, even in a transient culture where multiple moves are not unusual. The places we live and the places we grew up in have an impact, whether acknowledged or not, on our lives, our relationships, our dreams; and the houses we yearn for, whether real or imagined, reveal much about our inner nature. As a folklorist, I'm interested in how the idea of home is expressed in traditional stories; and as a fantasist, in how this translates into modern magical fiction.

Fairy tales, for example often begin with a hero propelled from his or her home by poverty or calamity: and the search for the safe haven of a new home, or the task of restoring prosperity to an old one, is central to such stories. Fairy tales tend to be rites-of-passage narratives, chronicling a transformational journey from one archetypal life stage to another. Most often, such tales follow a young hero's transition from childhood to adulthood, the completion of the journey symbolized by a wedding at the story's end. In the modern, simplified versions of the tales popularized by Disney films and children's books, the emphasis is so often placed on the romantic (and wealth-accumulating) aspects of the stories that finding "true love" (with a well-heeled spouse) can seem to be what fairy tales are all about. Older, adult versions of the tales, by contrast, are focused on the steps of the hero's passage through a period of upheaval and peril—a period required to test the hero's mettle and provoke growth and self-transformation. Such tales speak to the challenges we face at any time in life (not just in our youth)

The Piaras Legacy

Scott Gamboe

LONG AGO, SO THE LEGENDS SAY, the Necromancer Volnor invaded the continent of Pelacia. His legions of undead soldiers ravaged the land unchecked, until the three nations united and pushed their evil foes back into the Desert of Malator.

But that was centuries ago, and few people still believe the tale. Other, more worldly matters occupy their time, such as recent attacks by renegade Kobolds. But Elac, an Elf who makes his way as a merchant, is too concerned with his business affairs to become involved in international politics. Until a marauding band of Kobolds attacks Elac's caravan and he finds himself running for his life.

Befriended by an Elven warrior named Rilen, he travels to Unity, the seat of power on the Pelacian continent. There he is joined by a diverse group of companions, and he sets out on an epic quest to solve the riddle of his heritage and save the land from the growing evil that threatens to engulf it.

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when circumstances force us to leave home, either literally or metaphorically, setting us on the road to an unknown future and a new identity. *Snow White, Donkeyskin, The Girl With No Hands, Hans My Hedgehog*: these are all rites-of-passage narratives. Each tale begins in a childhood home that has become constricting, even dangerous, and each hero must leave this home behind in order to forge a new life in the adult world. The completion of the hero's task is marked by the traditional rewards of the fairy tale genre: a marriage, a crown, a storehold full of treasure; but the true reward at journey's end is a new-found ability to survive life's trials, transcend its terrors, and determine one's own fate.

Above and Opposite: Oliver Hunter's spirit house illustrations are based on the miniature house sculptures displayed on family mantlepieces in Eastern Europe. See more of his work at www.goblinfruit.net/cupfull.htm.

The heroes begin in one home and end in another (or else in the old home restored and renewed), but in between these two poles is a crucial period of homelessness. Homelessness is a liminal state rich in opportunities for character change and growth, which has made it a popular plot device among storytellers both old and new. Homelessness detaches the hero from the role he or she has played in the past, strips him or her of identity, blurs the markers of class or rank, removes usual sources of aid and comfort, and throws them on their own resources ... a perfect recipe for suspense, adventure, and heroic metamorphosis.

The archetypal hero's journey is often a different one for the young men and women in traditional stories, as Midori Snyder discussed in an article on the Armless Maiden folk tale: "In hero narratives," she wrote, "a young man leaves the familiar home of his birth and ventures into the unknown world where the fantastic waits to challenge him. Along the journey, his worth as a man and as a hero is tested. But when the trials are done, he returns home again in triumph, bringing to his society newfound knowledge, maturity, and often a magical bride." A young woman, by contrast, ventures out or is propelled into the world "knowing that she will never return home. Instead at the end of a perilous and solitary journey, she arrives at a new village or kingdom. There, disguised as a dirty-faced servant, a scullery maid, or a goose girl, she completes her initiation into adulthood and brings the gifts of knowledge, maturity, and fertility to a new home and community."

Such stories rose from societies in which this gender difference was a fact of life; where girls were expected to leave home upon marriage and join the household, village, or tribe of their new husband's family. (We see the echo of this tradition today when women give up their own names upon marriage.) The anxiety felt by women in such cultures, particularly in places where they were allowed no say in the choice of husband, was expressed by tales such as *Bluebeard, Fitcher's Bird,* and *Beauty and the Beast,* in which a young woman finds herself far from home, co-habiting with a monster.

Another staple of folk and fairy tales is the mysterious house that appears to offer shelter but is actually a source of danger or enchantment. The gingerbread house in Hansel and Gretel is a welcome sight to the two hungry children made homeless by their feckless parents, but it's really just a trap designed to lure boys and girls into a cooking pot. There are numerous tales in which weary travelers stumble upon a house in the woods with its front door standing invitingly open, a fire lit, a hot meal spread temptingly on the table, and the owner of the house nowhere in sight. Lisel Mueller wrote about just such a house in her magical poem "Voices from the Forest." No matter how exhausted you are, Mueller says, do not enter the house in the forest:

It is only when you finish eating
and, drowsy and grateful, pull off your shoes.
that the ax falls or the giant returns
or the monster springs or the witch
locks the door from the outside and throws away the key.

But if you must enter, Neil Gaiman has advice in his charming poem "Instructions":

A red metal imp hangs from the green-painted front door,
as a knocker,
do not touch it; it will bite your fingers.
Walk through the house. Take nothing. Eat nothing.

Those last words are important. Folk tales from all over the world warn that eating the food of a witch, a demon, a djinn, a troll, an ogre, or the fairies can be a dangerous proposition. You might owe your youngest child in return, or be bound to your host for the rest of your life. Likewise, don't kiss the beautiful woman who offers you a meal and a bed in her sumptuous chateau hidden deep in the woods. By morning light she'll be a monster, and her house but a pile of rocks and bones. Some enchanted houses appear for a single night each year and then vanish again. Be sure to be out by dawn or you too will disappear along with it. And sometimes the houses themselves are monstrous, such as the famous hut of the witch Baba Yaga in Russian fairy tales, which balances on chicken legs and can spin and move from place to place.

There are also houses in the woods, however, where the safe haven offered is not mere illusion, but is often put on the hero's path by a kindly fairy or a guardian angel. The hero of *The Girl With No Hands* finds just such a sanctuary deep in the forest, and the princess in *The White Deer* lives in one at night, when she's in human form. Jungian psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz considered these woodland dwellings to represent the place deep within ourselves where we retreat, in solitude, to ponder life's deeper meanings, heal our wounds, and renew our spirits. In tales like *The Girl With No Hands*, she said, the hero enters the woods (the psyche) in a maimed or enchanted state, and does not leave again until she is healed, whole, transformed.

In both Jungian psychology and dream analysis, a house is much more that just a dwelling or shelter—it is a symbol in the ancient, pictorial language of mythic archetypes. Dream analysts say that a house represents the levels of the dreamer's own mind, and some give each different part of the house a specific significance: The front porch is our social or public mask; the living room, our interior consciousness; the kitchen represents our potential—the place where ideas are stirred, cooked up, and brought into conscious form. Cabinets and drawers hold experiences; closets hold hidden aspects and talents; stairs represent growth and moving up to (or down from) higher levels of consciousness. A bedroom dream reveals the things that the subconscious mind is preoccupied with; a hallway leads to memories and the past, or to possibilities and the future. Rearranging the furniture indicates a sorting of priorities, ideals, or beliefs. A house demolition is a major life change, or the deterioration of physical health, and moving represents a change of conscious-

ness or a psychic upheaval.

Carl Jung himself had recurring dreams in which houses featured prominently. He often dreamed he was building a house, or had stumbled upon a new room in his home—representing, he said, the building of the self and the discovery of new ideas. In his forties, Jung bought a parcel of land and turned dream into reality by building Bollingen, his spiritual retreat on the banks of Lake Zurich. He started off with a low stone tower, built largely with his own two hands, its round shape representing the maternal archetype (and his own mother's recent death). Slowly, over thirty years, the house sprouted another tower, a courtyard, an annex, and a second floor, each addition marking a life change and the evolution of his theories of the psyche. Bollingen was Jung's attempt to achieve a "representation in stone of my innermost thoughts and the knowledge I had acquired.... From the very beginning, I felt the Tower was in some way a place of maturation—a maternal womb or maternal figure in which I would become what I was, what I am, and will be."

Jung's vision of a house, built in the round, as the embodiment of the "eternal feminine," had its roots in the mythology and building practices of ancient Greece, where the home was sacred to Hestia, goddess of the hearth and perpetual flame. Sometimes called "the forgotten goddess," Hestia rarely appears in the tales of the gods, and seems to have had few temples or acolytes; and yet she was actually the first of the goddesses, sitting higher in the Olympian pantheon than even Hera (wife of Zeus, goddess of love and marriage) or Demeter (goddess of fertility and the harvest). Although avidly courted by both Poseidon and Apollo, Hestia vowed she would never marry, dedicating herself instead to the management of Mount Olympus, home of the gods. For this, she received the first portion of tribute in the temple rites of all the other gods, and was worshiped at the hearth in the center of all houses and buildings. Each morning began with Hestian prayers as the family fire was stoked for cooking and heating; each day ended with prayers to the goddess as the fire was banked for the night. Unlike the rest of the Greek pantheon, well known for their tempers, jealousies, and quarrels, Hestia was an unusually stable goddess, revered for her gentle, calm, and forgiving nature. But lest we think of her as the Olympian equivalent of a 1950s housewife, limited to home and the service of others, she was also the first builder, the inventor of architecture, and the patron of these arts. Her symbols were the circle and perpetual flame (including the undying flame of the Olympics), and her sphere of influence reached beyond the home to the undying flame at the heart of the Senate.

Her counterpart in Roman myth was Vesta, although the two are not completely interchangeable. Vesta, too, was venerated at the hearth and thus played a central role in family life—but she also had public temples,

including her famous circular temple in Rome where priestesses tended the perpetual flame that was the city's source of spiritual strength. Called Vestal Virgins (having pledged themselves to thirty years of celibacy), Vesta's priestesses enjoyed an unusual degree of freedom and political power in a society that was not known for enlightened attitudes toward women. At the end of thirty years, the Vestal Virgins were free to end their vows and marry, but few cared to trade the privileges of their profession for the restricted life of the average Roman matron.

In addition to a central shrine to Vesta, most Roman families maintained shrines for a panoply of small domestic gods: the Lares, protectors of the household, and the Penates, gods of pantry and larder. Shrines to the Lares and Penates of the house were located conveniently close to the door so that offerings could be made frequently—for, like the fairies of English lore, they were troublesome if neglected. The door itself was watched over by Janus, the two-faced god of doors and gates, associated with endings and beginnings, joined in his duties by Cardea, the goddess of door handles and hinges. Ovid tells us that Cardea's power is "to open what is shut, and to shut what is open." As a result, she was also the goddess of midwives, called upon during difficult childbirths. The threshold, and the act of crossing over it, belonged to the trickster god Mercury (Hermes in Greek), whose sign, a phallic-shaped stone or statue, often stood guard at the front of the dwelling. It was customary to stroke the stone for luck when leaving or returning home.

While Greco-Roman myth divided the roles of the goddess of the home and the goddess of marriage (Hestia/Vesta on one hand, Hera/Juno on the other), Norse mythology combined them into a single powerful figure, the goddess Frigg. The wife of Odin and the queen of the Aesir, Frigg's province covered hearth, home, love, marriage, and child-bearing (among many other things), all of which were accorded high status. Only she, among all the gods, was permitted to share Odin's high seat and look out over the universe. In Celtic myth, Brigidh was the goddess of the hearth and the keeper of the sacred flame, although, like Frigg, her influence extended much beyond the domestic sphere; she was also the goddess of poetic eloquence and of skill in the planning of warfare. Brigidh's legends overlapped with those of Habondia, an Anglo-Saxon goddess of hearth and home. Household shrines to Brigidh or Habondia ensured the fertility of the marriage bed, tranquility among family members, and the blessing of domestic chores—especially the "magical arts" of cooking, bread baking, and brewing.

In Western mythic traditions, the home was the realm of female deities, but when we look at the lesser supernaturals—the Lares, the Penates, the various tribes of fairie—we find a range of male figures attached or attracted to human dwellings: hobgoblins, house brownies, hearth fairies, chimney trolls, and other similar creatures. These could be helpful and protective spirits if treated respectfully and generously (according to the creature's particular code), or they could make a house unlivable: spoiling the bread, curdling the milk, dampening the fire. We must go to other parts of the world to find traditions favoring male household gods, though even these tend to be among the minor deities. In China, for example, Tasao Wang is a popular hearth god in the countryside, where he watches over each household from his shrine by the hearth or stove. Great care must be taken not to swear, quarrel, or lie within the hearth god's hearing, for each year Tasao Wang makes an annual report to the celestial Jade Emperor, and this determines the family's luck (or lack thereof) in the year ahead. Vietnam has a similar deity called the Stove God, or Mandarin Tao—a clownish figure who's in such a rush to get to Heaven with his annual report that he often leaves his trousers behind and is commonly pictured without them. Oki-Tsu-Hiko-No-Kami and his consort, Oki-Tsu-Hime-No-Kami, are the kitchen gods of Japanese lore. As the children of harvest deities, their province is food storage and preparation; neglect of their shrine will cause the rice pot to boil over or the vegetables to rot. In Hindu myth, Annamurti, one of many forms of the god Vishnu, is the deity to call upon in the kitchen, where cooks make offerings of sweetened rice and milk to gain his favor. Hinukan, the hearth and kitchen god of the Uchinanchu people of Okinawa, is always paired in the household pantheon with Fuuru nu Kami, the god of the toilet. Without the latter figure, negative spirits attracted to waste matter would cause illness or worse. In Russian folklore, hearth spirits (usually male) followed their particular families from house to house. In customs similar to those here on Dartmoor, the first fire in a new fireplace was lit with coals or embers from the old, with all the doors standing open wide as the spirit was formally invited in.

It has been many, many years, however since an open fire was the indispensible center of the home, at least in Western culture,

and even the kitchen is losing its importance as rushed family members eat on the run. Where, then, is the heart of the modern home? The television, or computer screen? And what gods might be taking residence there, expecting tribute and propitiation? It is not only modern technology and an increasingly secular culture that has changed our relationship with our homes, however. For the first time in our history more of us live in cities than in rural communities; and few of us in the West still live on the land where our ancestors lived. Home is where we hang our hat, as the old song says, rather than a landscape grazed or farmed for generation after generation. Home means the place we live right now; tomorrow it may mean someplace different. We are now, most of us, like the female heroes in traditional stories who leave their home with no expectation of returning ... and we do this not once in our lives, but sometimes again and again and again. Folk tales remind us, however, that moving home is not a simple act; it's one with mythic reverberations. It's a rite-of-passage, with all the attendant dangers and potential rewards that such passages offer. Houses are more than just real estate; they represent our innermost selves (as the Jungians say) and the stages of our lives (as the fairy tales tell us). In both views, moving from one home to another means passing through a period of upheaval provoking internal change and self-transformation. And we're advised to carry the coals of our old life with us to kindle the new life ahead.

In fantasy literature, as in fairy tales, many stories begin with the loss of a home, and this is precisely what thrusts the protagonists into the world. Some stories, like Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* or Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, rest on the main protagonist's fierce desire to go home again; in others, they must find or create new homes for themselves in far distant lands: Diana Wynn Jones's *Charmed Life*, for example, or Austin Tappan Wright's *Islandia*. In fiction, too, it's a period of wandering and homelessness that allows for adventure and metamorphosis, propelling characters out of their settled ways of life and into their new roles as heroes. In children's fantasy, many adventures begin when a child's usual home is disrupted ... and they find themselves living with relatives, or in a summer cottage, or sent to boarding school, etc. It's interesting to note that a number of these tales—*The Owl Service* by Alan Garner, for example, or *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* by Joan Aiken—were penned by writers who grew up in England during World War II, a time when children were regularly sent away from home to escape German bombers. Displacement, once again, creates a space that is rich in narrative possibilities, with the added bonus that once the parents are off the scene, the young protagonists are thrown onto their own resources.

What I love best are those fantasy novels where the houses themselves are a source of enchantment, reminiscent of the fairy towers and haunted chateaux to be found in folk tales. The masterwork in this mini-genre is the "Gormenghast" trilogy by Mervyn Peake, in which an entire epic world is created beneath one rambling, crumbling roof. There are plenty of other fantastical houses I'd love to have a good wander in: Edgewood from John Crowley's *Little, Big*, for example, or Tamsin House from Charles de Lint's *Moonheart*; or Crackpot Hall from Ysabeau Wilce's recent novel *Flora Segunda*. (See the Further Reading list for others.) In such books, domestic spaces regain their aura of the numinous, connecting us, in our everyday lives, as we sleep and wake and cook and clean, to the realm of the gods, the fairies, the ancestors, and to worlds of magic.

In real life, too, there are those who turn their houses into enchanted spaces—particularly artists, some of whom seem compelled to transform the whole world around them. The Pre-Raphaelite visionary William Morris was famous for his desire to bring beauty into every small facet of daily life, designing his own furniture, fabrics, and wallpaper patterns; making his own dyes, weaving his own rugs, painting his own chimney tiles, and so forth. A revolution in British design was born from the fanciful homes he created for his family and his friends. The Bloomsbury artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant took their paintbrushes to every surface of Charleston, the farmhouse they shared with other writers and artists in the countryside of southeast England. Preserved and open to the public now, Charleston is a timeless, spell-bound world formed of pattern, color, and whimsy. Cardiff Castle in Wales was rebuilt at the end of the 19th century, turned into a fairy tale palace by the 3rd Marquess of Bute and his artist friends. With its Arab Room, its Chaucer Room, its folk tale nursery, etc., the castle is an elaborate dream of a medieval past that never was. In Moscow, Viktor Vasnetsov's magical home has been turned into a house-museum, featuring the mythic paintings for which this 19th-century artist is famed. The house is a fantasy vision, designed in the distinctive "Russian folk tale style" that Vasnetsov created and promoted as part of the Russian Revivalist movement. The mid-20th-century American artist Walter Inglis Anderson spent his last decades in a secluded, rustic cottage in Shearwater, Mississippi—where, unbeknownst to family and friends, he covered the walls of a padlocked room with luminous murals of astonishing beauty, born of a spiritual vision rooted in his passion for nature.

In my own cottage, the walls are covered with poems, quotes, drawings, and paintings of trees, deer, and fairy tale creatures—added slowly, year by year, as my life and my work in the house evolved. The goblins on the kitchen walls were inspired by Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market," and were painted by several artist friends: Brian Froud, Alan Lee, Charles Vess, Dennis Nolan, and Lauren Mills among them. These creatures are now part of the house's long story, even as I myself exit the tale. They'll live on for as long as subsequent owners choose not to cover them up ... and longer still, in the memories and imagination of a certain little girl, who will one day look back on her childhood and remember those goblins, grinning. Her parents have purchased the cottage from me, and soon she'll be moving into it. Soon, the word "home" will mean goblins to her, and white roses, and a roof of straw. As for me, I don't know what lies ahead. Or who I will be in this new stage of life. What new home will I find at the end of this rite-of-passage, and will it seem worth the journey? Or will life just seem ordinary and dull without my old house, with its goblins and ghosts?

Nah. As the folk tales tales tell us, it's when you leave home that adventure begins. ❧

Further Reading

FICTION

The House with a Clock in Its Wall by John Bellairs (Dial Press, 1973)

The Spiderwick Chronicles by Holly Black & Tony DiTerlizzi (Scholastic, 2003-2008)

Little, Big by John Crowley (Bantam Books, 1981)

Moonheart by Charles de Lint (Ace Books, 1984)

Coraline by Neil Gaiman (Scholastic, 2003)

Illyria by Elizabeth Hand (DS Publishing 2007)

Practical Magic by Alice Hoffman (Putnam, 1995)

The Probable Future by Alice Hoffman (Ballantine, 2004)

Moominland in Winter by Tove Jansson (Ernest Benn, 1967)

The House on the Borderland by William Hope Hodgson (Ace Books, 1962)

Child of a Rainless Year by Jane Lindskold (Tor Books, 2005)

In the Forests of Serre by Patricia A. McKillip (Ace Books, 2003)

The Gormenghast Trilogy by Mervyn Peake (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1946, 1950, 1959)

The High House by James Stoddard (Warner Aspect, 1998)

A Traveler in Time by Alison Uttley (Viking, 1964)

Flora Segunda by Ysabeau S. Wilce

POEMS

"Instructions" by Neil Gaiman, from *A Wolf at the Door* (Simon & Schuster, 2000)

"Voices from the Forest" by Lisel Mueller, from *Alive Together* (LSU Press, 1996)

ON THE WEB

"The Armless Maiden and the Hero's Journey" by Midori Snyder, http://www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/rrHJourney.html.

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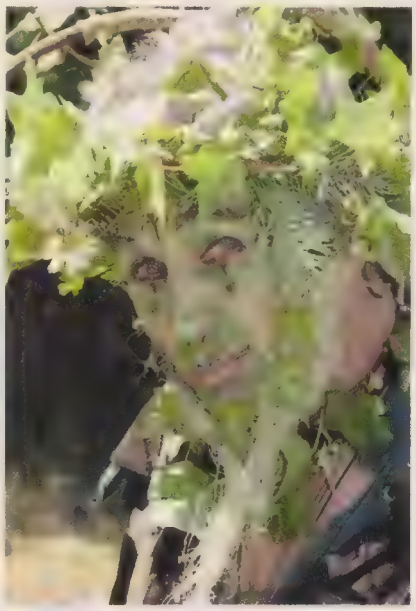
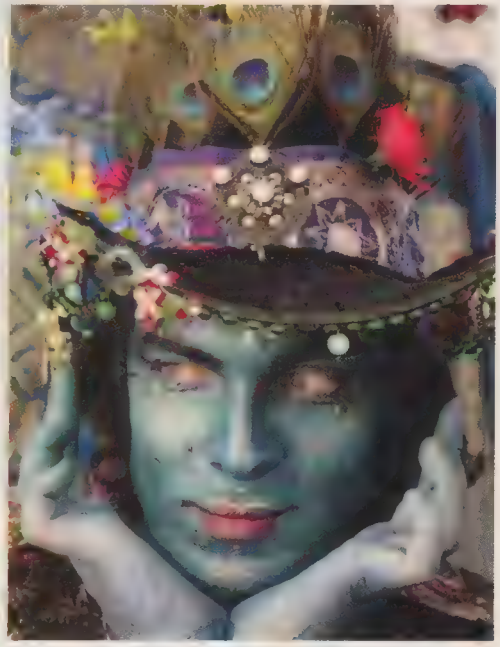


For the past four years on a summer weekend, faeries appear in a serene, wooded winery just outside of Eugene, Oregon. By the thousands they come, more every year, arrayed in their colorful faerie finery, replete with their ever-present wings. Solitary travelers, some with friends, many with families, some journeying literally hundreds even thousands of miles to join together and celebrate the enchantment of the Faerie Realm. But look closer: these are not the magical beings of legend and lore but humans of all ages, lovers of all things faerie who are celebrating the transforming effect of the Realm on their lives for a glorious weekend of art, music, dance, and imagination. This is Faerieworlds, the premier faerie festival on the West Coast.

How It Began

Like all things to do with Faerie, Faerieworlds was born unexpectedly, with the more than a little magic nurturing it along the way. In 2002, songwriters Emilio and Kelly Miller



Lopez approached Robert Gould, agent for international best-selling faerie author and artist Brian Froud, about using Brian's art on a new CD by their band, Woodland. Robert and Brian loved the music, and enthusiastically gave permission and Robert assisted Emilio with the design and art direction of the CD. In October, Woodland hosted a CD release party in Prescott, Arizona, for their friends and used Brian's cover art for the event invitations and poster. The night of the party, Robert got a call from Emilio.

"The event is sold out."

"Congratulations!"

"Yeah, thanks, but there's something else happening ..."

"What is it?"

"There's about 100 people outside with faerie wings on that want to get in."

From what they could tell after the event, it was Brian's art on the poster that motivated so many faerie fans to show up. Robert and Emilio decided to see "if this was real"; they booked an old opera house cum movie theater with a capacity of 600 and announced the first "Faerieworlds Festival": a Night of Faerie Celebration with special guests fantasy authors Terri Windling and Charles De Lint, an exhibition of original Brian Froud art, jugglers, storytellers, faerie toys and merchandise, and a concert performance by Woodland, accompanied by a Flash movie of Froud art projected on the theater's movie screen. The event sold out.

"As before, nearly everyone came in faerie costumes—and no one ever asked them to do so," says Robert. During the concert, guests of all ages joined hands in a circle and danced joyously around the theater. "When it was over everyone just wanted to know when it would happen again," says Emilio. That night, Faerieworlds was born.

Robert, Emilio, and Kelly went on to pro-

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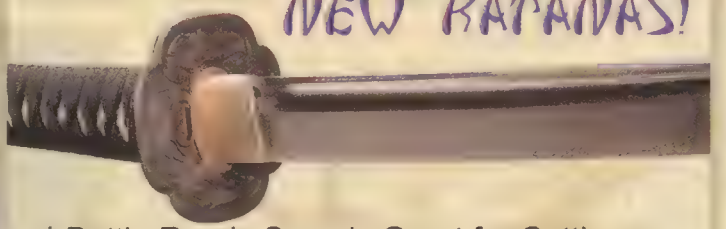

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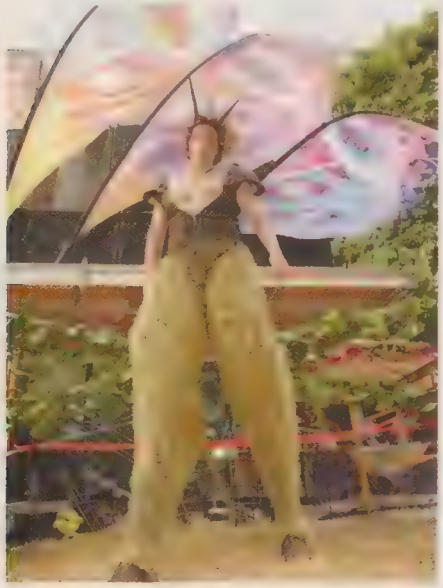
duce one-day Faerieworlds Festivals in Santa Fe and Los Angeles and at a spectacular outdoor amphitheater in the red rocks of Sedona, Arizona, that drew over 3,500 people. Each event featured a large vendors' village, walk-around entertainers, faerie authors and artists, and full-on concerts by internationally acclaimed musicians such as Scottish fiddler Johnny Cunningham, Irish singer Susan McKeown, the Australian rock band Brother, and Faerieworlds favorite, the celtic fusion band Woodland. "And at every event the guests arrived in faerie costumes," says Robert. "This was their choice—we never asked them to do so."



The Faerieworlds Festival was quickly outgrowing itself as a one-day event and Robert, Emilio, and Kelly set their sights on finding a permanent home for the festival. After some research, they decided on the Pacific Northwest and the Miller Lopez family moved to Eugene, Oregon, where they began planning for the first two-day Faerieworlds Festival in 2003 at a campground just outside Portland. Despite its inevitable first-event challenges, Faerieworlds Portland featured guests of honor Brian and Wendy Froud and an amazing musical line up of Solas, Phil Cunningham, Susan McKeown, Casey Neill, Rasputina, and Woodland and was deemed a success, attracting over 2,500 guests. The following year, Faerieworlds moved to its present home at the Secret House Winery in Veneta, outside of Eugene, where it has almost doubled its attendance three years in a row, attracting over 8,000 guests last year.

Event producers Robert, Emilio, and Kelly are committed to making each event better than the last. Over the years, Faerieworlds has welcomed internationally acclaimed faerie artists Amy Brown, Jessica Galbreth, David Delamare, Michael Hague, Linda Ravenscroft, and Jody Bergsma as well as authors Holly Black, Ari Berk, Patricia McKillip, and many more.

Music is an essential part of the Faerieworlds experience: in addition to the bands mentioned above, Faerieworlds bands include Kevin Burke, Karan Casey, Kan'Nal, John Renbourn, Trillian Green, Wake the Dead, and Gaia Consort. These bands perform during the day and under the stars complete with full-on stage productions and faerie light shows.

Another essential dimension of Faerieworlds is the vendors' village: the producers agreed to

set a high bar for acceptance, seeking out the best artists, artisans, and craftspeople from all over the country so as to offer a unique and diversified shopping experience for their guests. "We are also deeply committed to running a 'zero impact' event: everything on site is recycled—including requiring that the food vendors use biodegradable 'noodleware' and no Styrofoam—and only green power is used on site," says Kelly. "Faerieworlds also believes in giving back: each year the producers make a donation to a local ecological or children's charity."

The Experience: Immersed in Faerie

Throughout the years as Robert, Emilio, and Kelly assembled these amazing artists, musicians, and vendors, they had an important realization: the most compelling reason people came to Faerieworlds was for the experience of being immersed in Faerie. "Unlike a Renaissance Faire where attendees move through a themed space and watch staged shows, at Faerieworlds the guests are the show," says Emilio. "From our surveys over the last two years we discovered that over 80 percent of Faerieworlds' guests are women between the ages of 20 and 40—older than you might imagine!—and 80 percent come in costume. And of those who do, 75 percent make their own."

Faerie fans go to Faerieworlds to "see and be seen." At most pop culture events like comic book, anime, *Star Wars*, or *Star Trek* conventions, people buy or make costumes of a favorite character that exists outside of themselves in pop culture. Faerie fans do just the opposite: they reach inside of themselves to discover, connect to, and create their magical faerie selves and express their highly unique and individual imagination. As in MMOGs or virtual worlds, guests meet each other as self-created expressions of their magical selves drawn from the hidden world within, and in this meeting and bonding, strong friendships are made. As Robert puts it, "Children and adults come together at Faerieworlds: families

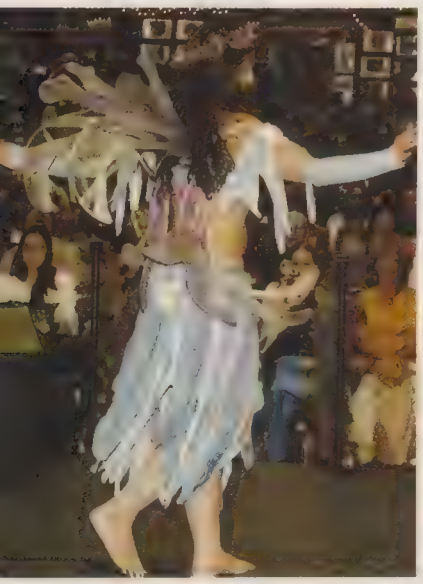
dance and play as one, generations of faerie fans share love of the Realm by becoming Faerie itself."

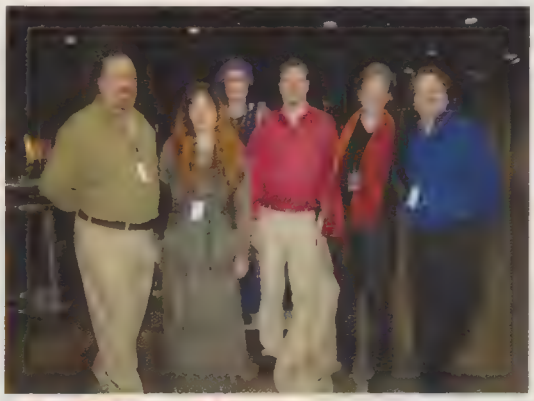
FaerieCon: The Faeries Troop East

"For several years, fans of Froud and faerie were clamoring for Faerieworlds to bring its magic to the East Coast. This presented

numerous production, marketing, and venue challenges for the producers, predominantly the uncertainly of the weather, which is not a factor in the Pacific Northwest in late July. Says Emilio, "Last year, after much research and courage gathering, we, Faerieworlds, announced our first East Coast indoor event: FaerieCon International, which was held at the Pennsylvania Convention Center in Philadelphia on October 12-14."

With Brian and Wendy Froud as guests of honor, FaerieCon quickly became the largest gathering of faerie artists ever assembled. Artists and authors included Jessica Galbreth, Charles Vess, Kinuko Craft, Michael Hague, Jasmine Becket Griffith, Ted Naesmith, Linda Ravenscroft, Josephine Wall, Courtney Davis, Jen Delyth, Joseph Corsentino, Helena Nelson Reed, Holly Black, John and Caitlin Matthews, Ari Berk, Ellen Kushner, Delia Sherman, and many others. Many of the top vendors, artisans, and craftspeople who attend Faerieworlds made the journey to Philly and were joined by their East Coast brethren to create an exceptional shopping experience for the guests. Robert and folklorist and author Ari Berk created an entertaining and informative program of panels and presentations featuring FaerieCon's artists and authors, and the event also featured a faerie fashion show and musical performances in the main hall.



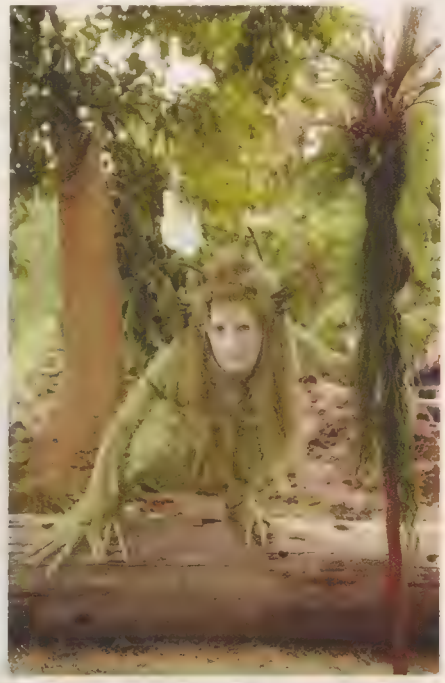


"We knew an important part of making FaerieCon a success was replicating the dynamic, nighttime rock shows of Faerieworlds," says Robert, "so we created the Good Faeries and Bad Faeries Masquerade Balls on Friday and Saturday nights at the famous Trocadero Theater, just down the street from the convention center." The featured bands included Estampie and Qntal from Germany, both of which made their U.S. debuts at FaerieCon and delivered show-stopping performances; guitarist Scott Huckabay; and the Faerieworlds headlining band, Woodland. Each night's performance featured "Good" and "Bad" Faeries-themed light shows created by Toby and Brian Froud. The Masquerade Balls emerged as the undisputed highlight of FaerieCon, with beautifully costumed guests dancing until midnight and an oft-heard saying with an exuberance (maybe wildness), "What happens at the Bad Faeries Ball, stays at the Bad Faeries Ball." When the faerie dust had finally settled, FaerieCon had attracted over 7,000 guests and 180 vendors for the three days, an exceptional attendance for a first show.

Faerieworlds continues to redefine the festival scene on the West Coast. Steadfastly staying true to their commitment to make each year bigger and better, Robert, Emilio, and Kelly have expanded Faerieworlds to three days, August 1-3, with shows now running until midnight. They booked a stellar line-up of bands including Estampie and Qntal in their first West Coast performance, Spanish faerie musician Priscilla Hernandez in her U.S. debut, Trillian Green, Woodland, Kan'nal, Lunar Fire, Gaia Consort, and Zilla, the spin-off band from String Cheese Incident. Artist guests include Brian and Wendy Froud and internationally acclaimed faerie artists Amy Brown and Jessica Galbreth.

FaerieCon returns to Philadelphia next October 10-12 with international best-selling fantasy artist and Oscar winner Alan Lee as guest of honor. Best known as the illustrator and production designer for *The Lord of the Rings*, and the co-creator of the classic book *Faeries* with Brian Froud, Alan will be making his first convention appearance in the United States. Nearly all of last year's faerie artists are returning, with more to be announced in the coming months. Once again, the Good and Bad Faeries Masquerade Balls will envelop the Trocadero, with featured performers including the European Celtic band Omnia, the return of Qntal and Woodland, and the East Coast premiere performance of Priscilla Hernandez. Currently, the producers are close to confirming the return of Faerieworlds to Sedona, Arizona, in May 2009 and are exploring a regional tour of the Good and Bad Faeries Masquerade Balls on the club circuit.

In a time of economic, political, and social challenges, there is nothing like immersing yourself in the inspiring and revitalizing energy of faerie to renew your heart and spirit. In the words of Brian Froud, "To dress as a faerie—donning wings—is to actively join in the dance, to be connected to the creative spirit. Graceful or ecstatic dance; the radiant, rhythmic heartbeat; friendship; music; all these move easily across the boundaries, transcending language, race, and time. Such activities extend a joyful hand across the threshold. At Faerieworlds and FaerieCon, we ring the bells of faerie invitation. The people come. More importantly, the faeries come too." ❧



By Paul Witcover & Jeff VanderMeer

Third-Wave feminism is playful, sexy, sophisticated, and capable of kicking butt.

So-called Third-Wave feminism is in full flower within the fantasy genre. My understanding of that somewhat amorphous critical term is a feminism that has evolved beyond didacticism, dogmatism, and binary opposition, a feminism that questions all gender stereotypes, including its own, and has sought to reclaim genres or elements of genres (notably romance and erotica) that earlier feminist orthodoxy viewed with distaste or suspicion as expressions or even tools of oppression. It's a feminism sufficiently empowered and self-confident to admit to ironies, ambiguities, and complexities in the overlapping realms of sexuality and politics that previous generations of feminists, storming the barricades, then defending and expanding their precarious gains, didn't always have the luxury to acknowledge, let alone embrace. It's playful, sophisticated, sexy ... and, when necessary, fully capable of kicking butt. And because it's not monolithic, or even gender specific, but instead more a matter of perspective, a way of looking at oneself and the world, Third-Wave feminism has been a powerful tool in the hands of fantasy writers looking to tell new stories ... or reinvent old ones.

John Picacio created fantastic interior illustrations and the cover painting for Elric: The Stealer of Souls *by Michael Moorcock. See more of John's work at www.johnpicacio.com.*

That's literally the case with Jo Graham's captivating first novel, ***Black Ships*** (Orbit, New York, trade paperback, 448 pp. $14.99, ISBN: 978-0-316-06800-0), which tells, or rather retells, the epic tale composed by Virgil at the behest of Augustus Caesar more than two thousand years ago: of how, after the fall of Troy, impelled by desperate necessity and guided by the gods, Prince Aeneas brought the escaped survivors to a place of refuge destined to become the immortal city of Rome. But Graham is not interested in merely updating *The Aeneid,* putting a postmodern spin on characters and events plucked from Greek mythology and literature to serve the ideological ends of a newbie emperor. Sifting through the archaeological record, Graham has found hints of a forgotten historical basis to Virgil's poem and used them to craft a highly speculative but provocative hypothesis on which to hang a page-turning plot brimming with adventure and romance. Ancient Egyptian sources record the depredations of Bronze Age invaders known the Sea People: Graham postulates that these northern interlopers were Greeks, Achaians led by the descendants of the men who led the attack against Troy—men like Neoptolemos, the son of Achilles, who, envious of the supposedly glorious deeds of their fathers and grandfathers, carry Parthenon-sized chips on their shoulders. Further, she supposes that mercenaries in the service of the Egyptians were the exiled and defeated Trojans led by Aeneas. Finally, she takes a fragment of a tablet recovered from the Greek city of Pylos that refers to "the woman of Troy, the servant of the God," and from this tantalizing inscription creates a memorable narrator and heroine, Gull, the crippled daughter of a Trojan slave who becomes a powerful priestess of Persephone, the Queen of the Dead.

The black ships of the novel's title belong to the somewhat threadbare fleet of Aeneas. These ships are symbols of death but also of rebirth; they represent all that was lost in the sack of Troy, yet they are simultaneously transports to a glorious destiny. Poised between a tragic, blood-drenched past and a hopeful future, the black ships stand as well for a world that is itself undergoing dramatic change, in which bastions of civilization and civilized behavior are collapsing, pulled down by greedy, short-sighted men like Neoptolemos who mistake brutality for strength and compassion for weakness. This aspect of the novel, in which one age of the world is gradually but violently supplanted by another, invests Graham's story

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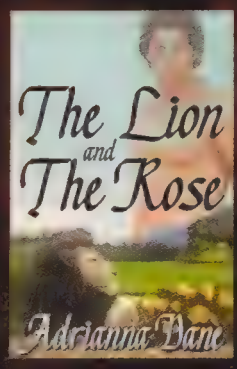

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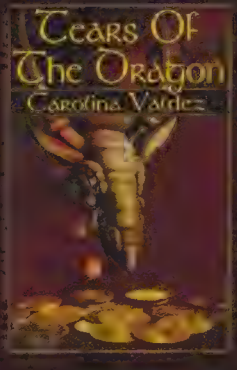

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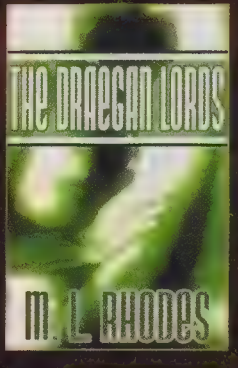

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with a surprising contemporary resonance.

As the priestess of Persephone, Gull is a healer and an oracle as well as a kind of spirit guide through the realms of the dead. She thus serves death and life. These are traditional female roles, but Graham isn't interested in having Gull rebel against them, or in setting them up as superior alternatives to such traditional male roles as prince and warrior. Instead, she allows Gull to explore and inhabit them freely, or as freely as possible given the historical realities of time and place. Nor, equally importantly, does she censor or shape Gull's sexuality and the difficult choices she faces in accommodating duty and desire. The result is a character who feels fully fleshed out yet—with rare exceptions toward the end of the novel—does not seem atavistic, invested with sensibilities foreign to her time. The same is true of Aeneas, who must learn to accept the responsibilities and sacrifices of kingship.

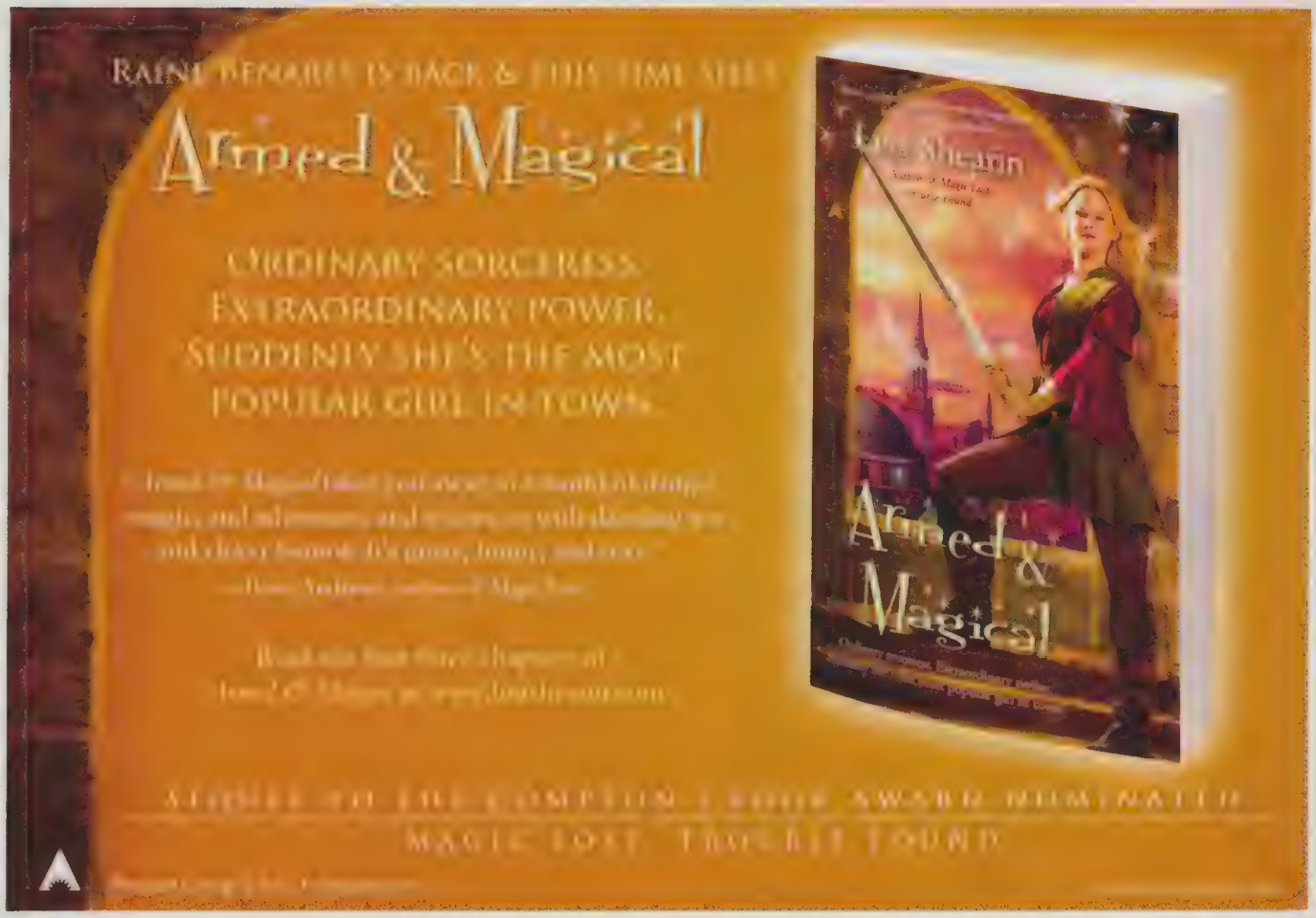
Graham's inspired, relentlessly entertaining take on the *The Aenied* reminded me of the late David Gemmell's Troy trilogy, which does the same for *The Iliad,* and her canny incorporation of supernatural elements reminded me of Gene Wolfe's classic Soldier series, featuring the amnesiac warrior Latro. Graham may not come up to the level of these masters in her first novel, but then again, neither did they in theirs. This is an auspicious debut.

So is ***Waking Brigid*** (Tor, New York, hardcover, 368 pp. $25.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-1810-7), by Francis Clark. Despite being less than assured in its storytelling mechanics, this messy but mesmerizing novel marks the appearance of a strong new talent. Its plot—pitting magicians in the service of the Catholic Church against a coven of Satan worshippers who have opened a portal to a demon in the city of Savannah, Georgia, some ten years after the Civil War—is increasingly perfunctory, punctuated by predictable set pieces in which the demon picks off its adversaries one by one until the inevitable showdown between the two opposing groups, the outcome of which is never in doubt. But Clark's prose is sparkling and fresh, and when he delves below the surface of his by-the-numbers plot into the hearts and minds of his characters, especially the title character, he shines.

As the title suggests, this novel is about a woman's awakening. Thirty-four-year-old Brigid Rourke was raised in a small Irish town where belief in the old pagan ways was still strong despite the influence of the Catholic Church. Brigid, a lively and curious child, was marked by family tradition and innate magical ability—here called the Sight—to become the wise woman of her village ... until the Potato Famine struck. Then, to ease the burden on her family—and to remove a potential rival for the spiritual upper hand—the local priest arranged for Brigid to be taken from her family and raised by nuns in far-off Dublin, where, in due course, she became a nun herself, her pagan past and the magic that went along with it not so much forgotten as guiltily repressed, especially after she emigrated to Savannah and nursed wounded soldiers during the Civil War.

Brigid is one of the first responders when an apparent madman in Savannah's Saint Joseph's Hospital is inexplicably murdered, and the shock of witnessing the horrific aftermath triggers her long-dormant Sight, giving her a glimpse of the supernatural trail left behind by the demon responsible. The Church hierarchy is quick to recognize and respond to the otherworldly threat, and Bishop Francis Shea summons Father Benito, a Benedictine monk from Saint Augustine who is an experienced exorcist as well as a member of a secret society of white magicians operating within the Church.

Benito recognizes immediately that the demon is beyond his strength, and he contacts his superior in the order, a brilliant but arrogant Jesuit named Father Rimaldi. Rimaldi, based in Baltimore, wastes no time in summoning to Savannah five magicians he deems of sufficient power to destroy the demon and the coven. Yet as quickly as he moves, the logistics of 19th-century transportation dictate



that, for some days at least, an overmatched Benito will be the only thing standing between the demon's bloody appetites and the innocent people of Savannah.

But Benito is not as alone as he seems. The local adherents of voodoo, made up largely of ex-slaves, are a potential ally against the coven—though the racist Savannah society, as well as the Church's strong antipathy toward voodoo, make any cooperation dangerous and problematic. Fortunately, a nearer ally is at hand: Sister Brigid. When Benito looks at her using the Sight, he is astounded to see that her power dwarfs his own. He undertakes to tutor her in the arts of magic, hoping that he can give her enough control to protect herself from the demon and aid him in his own efforts.

As Brigid's powers burgeon, along with repressed sexual feelings, she finds her Catholic faith shaken to the roots. Old memories of pagan rites and gods surge up in her, and Benito is not equipped to exorcise them. The struggle of the pagan worldview against the Catholic, both in Savannah and within Brigid's soul, is the real conflict of this novel. Brigid's magical abilities put her outside the sexist hierarchy of the Church, and, ultimately, outside Christian beliefs altogether. In tracing her doubts and inner struggles, her slow acceptance of the woman she has the potential to become, Clark soars above the limitations of his plot. Sadly, he died unexpectedly before *Waking Brigid* was published, soon after completing his second novel. The loss of such a promising talent is doubly tragic.

Rounding out this column's trio of first novels is Pamela Freeman's ***Blood Ties***, Book One of The Castings Trilogy (Orbit, New York, trade paperback, 480 pp. $12.99, ISBN: 978-0-3160-3346-6). Freeman notes in her acknowledgments that an earlier version of this novel served as her doctoral thesis in Creative Arts, and a stultifying weight of academic earnestness hangs over the narrative. Unlike the other writers considered here, Freeman seems locked into an earlier wave of feminism in which nuances are avoided, stereotypes, especially of gender, embraced, and political correctness considered a virtue.

Blood Ties is set in the land of the Eleven Domains. Each of these domains is ruled by a petty warlord, a descendant, along with most of the population, of blue-eyed invaders called Actons who, a thousand years ago, crushed the indigenous inhabitants and stole their land and possessions. The descendants of the dispossessed indigenes are known as Travelers; many of them, gypsy-like, wander between the towns and villages of the domains, serving necessary functions of trade and so on, objects of resentment, superstition, and casual, often violent, prejudice.

The supernatural in the Eleven Domains has four main manifestations. The first is a form of fortune-telling that utilizes stones carved with various runes; when cast by a talented oracle, the stones are generally infallible if somewhat inscrutable in their prognostications. The second is a kind of necromancy that relies upon the spilled blood of a sorcerer. Third, when a person dies, especially in violent circumstances, his or her ghost "quickens" after three days—appearing at the place of death. Such ghosts either haunt the living or are laid to rest by the one responsible for their deaths. And finally, the gods of the indigenes are still somewhat accessible and sometimes communicate their wishes and desires to their worshippers.

Blood Ties focuses on three young characters whose paths gradually converge. All possess Traveler blood to some degree. Saker is a sorcerer obsessed with revenge against the invaders. Using blood magic, he aims to not only raise the ghosts of his slaughtered ancestors but to give their spirits substance so that they can exact a long-delayed revenge. Bramble is a young woman forced to take to the road in order to escape retribution after she kills an Acton thug in self-defense; sensitive to the whisperings of the gods, and, following a bizarre accident, gifted or cursed with a peculiar sort of half-life, she seeks answers from an oracle known as the Well of Souls. Ash is an apprentice assassin with the rare ability not

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only to speak to ghosts but to compel them to reply; along with a stonecaster named Martine, he, too, travels toward the Well of Souls. Of the three, his tale is the most original; the book picks up steam when it focuses on his adventures, and I found myself wishing that Freeman had spread a little of that energy around. Bramble's path, by contrast, despite its uncanny branching, is a well-trodden one.

Freeman is capable of effective writing when she fights her way past melodrama and cliché, but for some reason she seems perversely determined to make technical choices that work against her. For instance, she intersperses her narrative with chapters that tell the stories of minor characters from the immediately preceding chapter; these vignettes are meant to add depth to the narrative, which they sometimes do, but at the cost of slowing down an already torpid plot. Further, despite being told in the first person, they are identical in tone, revealing a tin ear.

That is not a criticism anyone is likely to level against Jeri Smith-Ready, whose latest novel, ***Wicked Game*** (Pocket, New York, trade paperback, 384 pp. $14.00, ISBN: 978-1-4165-5176-8), sparkles with sexy, witty banter. By now it's tough for a writer to come up with a new twist on vampires, but Smith-Ready rises to the occasion. Her vampires become psychologically stuck in the eras in which they were made, and this inability to grow and change with the times is what ultimately destroys them. But a group of vamps finds the perfect accommodation for their problem: deejaying at a local radio station. This station, located in Maryland (and reminiscent, for those of us who grew up in that area, of the late, great independent station, WHFS), features a lineup of DJs specializing in the music of bygone eras and styles. Each of these DJs is secretly a vampire. By playing the music they know and love, they are able to remain psychologically healthy. Nor need they prey upon humans, for Smith-Ready conjures up a kinky subculture of men and women who get their kicks from having their blood sucked at regular intervals.

Ciara is not a vampire. But she is a bloodsucker; specifically, a scam artist raised in religious cons who has branched out. She's trying to turn her life around, channeling her instinct for the main chance into a marketing career. The station hires her: she learns about the vampires, and, after freaking out, comes up with a brilliant marketing plan to save the station from being taken over by a soulless conglomerate based on Clear Channel. Instead of hiding the fact that the DJs are vamps, she advertises it, certain that no one will really believe such an outlandish claim. The clever PR gimmick works, drawing tons of new listeners and advertisers ... until another group of vamps, believing that Ciara is recklessly putting them at risk of exposure, decides to fight back with more than just words.

Matters are complicated when Ciara finds herself falling in love with hunky Shane McAllister, a vamp from the grunge era who hasn't yet completely lost touch with popular culture and the contemporary world. The chemistry between these two is full of heat and danger, for Ciara has no desire to become a vampire—she just wants to sleep with one. And, if possible, teach the old dog new tricks. *Wicked Game*—an unfortunate title that has the feel of having been foisted on the author—is a fun, fast read. It's the literary equivalent of an addictive pop song, the kind you leave your radio on to hear. With apologies to the Glimmer Twins: it may not be rock and roll, but you'll like it.

Paul Witcover

Sharp Teeth, Toby Barlow, HarperCollins, New York, hardcover, 308 pp., $22.95, ISBN: 978-0-06-143022-0.

Who knew that a werewolf story written in free verse could be so nuanced and original? Set in present-day Los Angeles and featuring a pack of ancient lycanthropes that can move from human to wolf form at will, this

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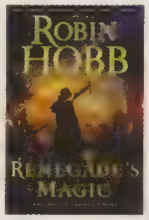
novel-in-poetry form has a lean and focused freshness that contributes to its originality. Anthony, a dogcatcher, becomes involved with the pack due to a crush on a woman who is secretly a werewolf. From there, the plot unfolds across a tableau of modern Western culture and battles between rival wolf packs. *Sharp Teeth*'s two best qualities are its precise portrait of sprawling Los Angeles and its focus on the emotional lives of its characters. Poetry purists may not find anything new here, but by breaking his narrative into short lines it forces readers to focus in a way they wouldn't have had the author chosen a more conventional approach. Mostly, though, I'm amazed anyone could make a jaded reader like me care about a werewolf novel. Lines like these don't hurt: "She woke up with the sleeping pack/lying all around her like waves in a strange ocean."

The Veil of Gold, Kim Wilkins, Tor, New York, hardcover, 496 pp., $25.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-2006-3.

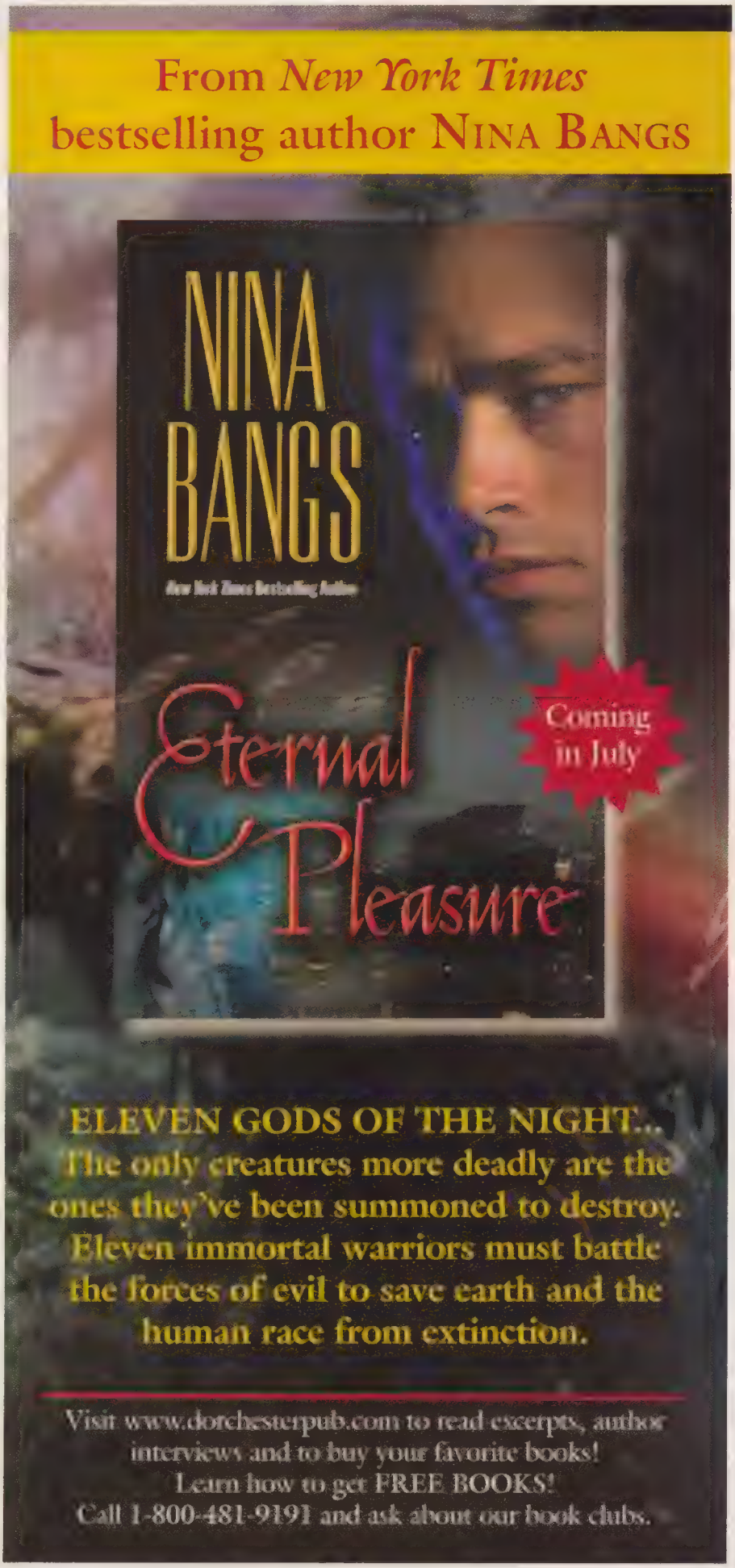
In this unusual novel by a talented Australian writer, Rosa, a beautiful woman with interests in both the mundane and magical worlds of current-day Russia, convinces an ex-lover, Daniel, to assist her Uncle Vasily in determining the value of a mysterious golden bear found during a real estate development project. Daniel, a timid, self-conscious Englishman, is still in love with Rosa. He travels with his co-worker and fellow Brit, the professional and seemingly cold-hearted Em, to seek an expert's opinion on the bear. During their trip they cross over the veil into the magical land of Russian fairy tales and encounter all kinds of wonders and dangers. The golden bear is at the heart of their adventures as it seeks to be reunited with its rightful owner. Rosa is drawn into the quest when she decides to follow Daniel and Em, tapping into her own long-suppressed magical abilities in the process. The author skillfully interjects relevant Russian history and includes quotes from the Russian that she translated herself. Perfectly combining the realistic and the magical, the novel features strong female characters who are confident and self-assured, yet all too human. The transformations of all three main characters as they travel between the two worlds makes *The Veil of Gold* more than an adventure tale filled with frightening and enlightening revelations. The result instead is an unpredictable melding of the traditional and the strange.

Renegade's Magic, Robin Hobb, Eos, New York, 672 pp., hardcover, $25.95, ISBN 978-0-06-07576-4-9.



This third book in Hobb's Soldier Son trilogy is a full-throttle reply to readers who

From *New York Times*
bestselling author NINA BANGS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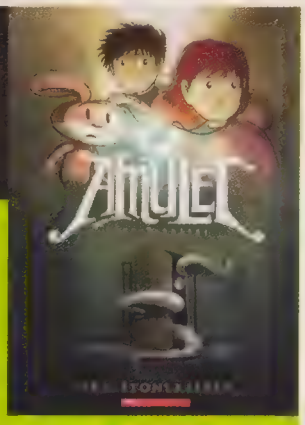
GRAPHIC NOVEL REVIEWS

BY JEFF VANDERMEER



Amulet, Book One: The Stonekeeper, Kazu Kibuishi, Scholastic, New York, NY, trade paperback, 185 pp., $9.99, ISBN: 978-0-439-84681-3.

The history of Fantasy is littered with the scattered remains of books that took their magic seriously but not their characters—or, more accurately, didn't take life seriously. True fantasy classics, in any medium, reflect what we know about the real world: that it's a bittersweet place in which terrible things sometimes happen for no apparent reason. Further, imagination and creativity must be wedded to the personal, with actions having real consequences. Otherwise, we're left with diaphanous eye candy that may hold up on a first read but doesn't remain in the reader's memory any longer than the weather report on the evening news.

Which brings me to Kazu Kibuishi. As the editor of the groundbreaking *Flight* series, an excellent yearly anthology of fantasy comics, Kibuishi has introduced readers to great fantasy storytelling from a wide variety of creators. Now, in *The Stonekeeper*, book one of his Amulet series, Kibuishi unveils the beginning of a truly imaginative yet grounded story that may well become a classic.

In the opening scene of *The Stonekeeper*, Emily and Navin's father, David, dies in front of their eyes during a car accident. Two years later, the children and their mother, Kathy, move to an ancestral home because they can't afford to live in their old house anymore. Silas Charnon, the children's great-grandfather, purportedly locked himself away in the house after the death of his wife and was never heard from again. Now, years later, Kathy is spirited away into a tunnel by a tentacled creature. The children race after her, only to find themselves in a strange underground land. In their attempts to find their mother, they encounter all manner of peculiar creatures and people. Elves, robots, and mysterious cloaked strangers make appearances, without any of these disparate elements seeming to clash.

In terms of the full story arc, the children have stumbled into the middle of a larger battle, the outlines of which they can only vaguely see, but which involves an amulet Emily found in the house. By the end of book one, a few mysteries have been resolved—like what happened to Silas Charnon—but new mysteries have replaced them.

The art in *The Stonekeeper* is fully up to the task of illuminating the complex and multilayered plot. As a counterpoint to the intense nature of the action, Kibuishi finds joy and delight in ingenious portrayals of monsters and of the underground land through which Emily and Navin travel during most of the book. Giant mushrooms used as parachutes, stampeding herds of huge tick-like creatures, land-dwelling squid embedded in the walls of a corridor, a marvelous flying ship—these are only a few of the wonders that await readers. The color palate throughout is burgundy-rich without being garish, Kibuishi's drawing style expressive and deft without being facile. The detail work on backgrounds is complex but not overwhelming.

In interviews, Kibuishi has cited Jeff Smith's *Bone* and Hayao Miyazaki films as influences. If so, the influence is subsumed enough that *The Stonekeeper* doesn't feel like pastiche. Unlike *Bone*, Kibuishi doesn't indulge in slapstick—given the serious subject matter, it would be difficult to incorporate too much humor. The book also lacks Miyazaki's environmental concerns, which tend to radically affect the overall tone and individual set pieces in his movies.

In fact, there's a great old-fashioned feel to *The Stonekeeper*, with little irony and no winking at the reader. This helps to reinforce suspension of belief even during the most outrageous events. For example, could a giant mushroom *really* work as a way for a child to glide from the top of a cliff to safety? Probably not. But, under the spell of Kibuishi's magic, we believe it for as long as we need to. This old-fashioned quality is mirrored in the design of the robots in the book, which harkens back to the 1950s. It's a charming effect that doesn't "date" Kibuishi's work at all.

The Stonekeeper is being marketed to children and young adults, but it contains plenty of marvels for all readers. I highly recommend it.❧

grumbled about slow pacing at the beginning of the series. As hellacious battles and more personal dramas play out, it becomes clear that Hobb needed the slow build-up to create maximum pay-off. In this thrilling conclusion, the innocent Gernia soldier Nevare Burvelle finds himself stitched up for crimes he did not commit and thus forced into a terrible alliance with a magical alter-ego called Soldier Boy, created by Lisana, his lover. This decision launches him into a full-scale assault on his oppressor's assets that drives him to the brink of death. Hope comes from unexpected places, but not so unexpected as to seem arbitrary. Hobb's writing unfurls here with muscular and self-assured bravado, the characters fascinating and three-dimensional. The magical rules employed may not withstand close scrutiny, but most readers will be happy to ignore the inconsistencies in the service of such ambitious storytelling.

Gods and Pawns, Kage Baker, Tor Books, New York, 335 pp., trade paperback, $14.95, ISBN 978-0-7653-1553-3.

For those unfamiliar with Kage Baker's Company novels, this collection serves as a brilliant starting place to sample her unique take on time travel. The Company is a ruthless organization that protects the future from the past by going back to stop any actions that might alter history. Baker has taken this idea and created funny, sad, thrilling, and horrific stories over the years. I don't know many writers who can pull off such a range of tone and emotion; Baker even manages to pull off slapstick! Although ostensibly science fiction, most Company fiction reads more like historical fantasy, with reader favorites like agent Mendoza making prominent appearances. From South America and Europe in the 1600s to 1950s America, *Gods and Pawns* provides multi-geo/chrono-graphical excitement, adventure, and, yes, introspection. This collection first came out in hardcover in 2007 but didn't receive nearly the attention it deserved. Now available in an attractive trade paperback, perhaps it will receive its due.

Elric: The Stealer of Souls, Volume 1, Michael Moorcock, Del Rey, New York, trade paperback, 458 pp., $15.00, ISBN: 978-0-345-49862-5.

Gorgeously illustrated by John Picacio throughout, this first of a multivolume set collecting all of Michael Moorcock's iconic Elric stories features a foreword by Alan Moore, an introduction by the author, early artwork associated with the series, "Mission to Asno!", a short story about the Elric precursor character Sojan, and fascinating related letters and miscellany. However, the heart of Volume 1 consists of the complete text of *The Stealer of Soul* and *Stormbringer.* These two classic episodic novels do not seem dated or old-fashioned on a re-read, but instead reaffirm Moorcock's importance to epic fantasy by virtue of its subversion of traditional tropes. The author's bemusement in his introduction at the idea of Elric having entered the respectable canon of heroic fantasy seems well-founded. Regardless, Volume 1, with its eye-catching cover and as much context as any reader could wish for, should introduce a whole new generation of readers to the famous albino warrior.

Jeff VanderMeer

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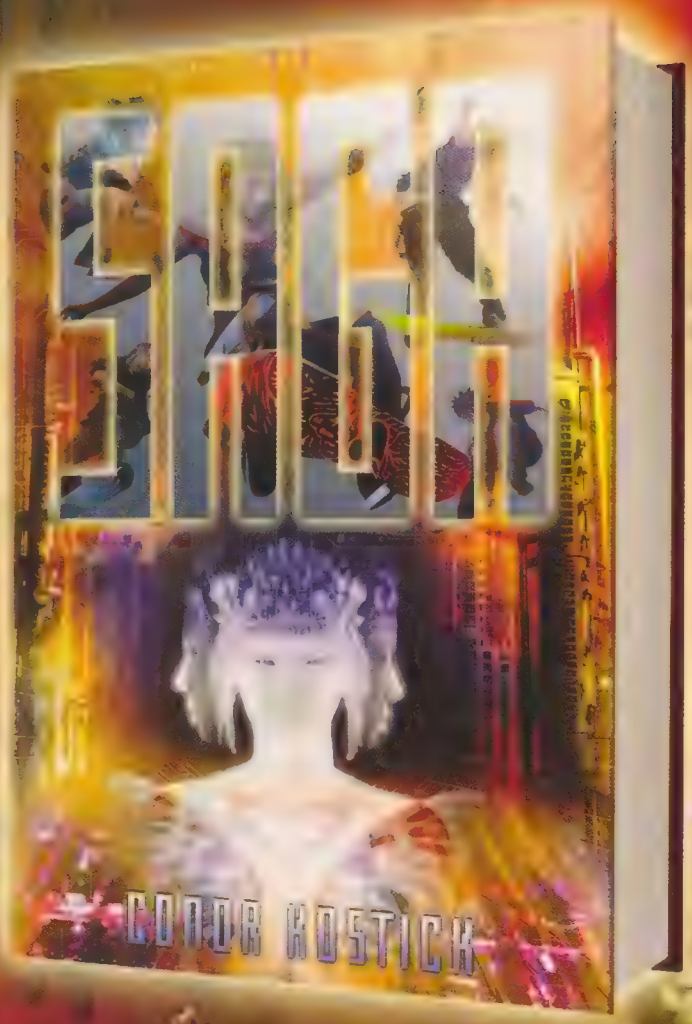

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A Letter to Nancy

BY CARRIE VAUGHN ILLUSTRATION BY LAURIE HARDEN

Molly always looked the soldiers in the eyes, or eye, in this case.

Private Andrews's injuries were worse than many, not as bad as some. He could still walk, move, and speak. He could still see, at least a little. He had a bandage over his right eye and most of his head. Blood stained the linens and streaked his face; it was a field dressing, not the best. Just enough to get him moving, away from the front to the proper hospital on the coast of Belgium. He waited with a thousand other soldiers for treatment, then to heal enough to take a ship across the Channel and back home. He wouldn't be fighting in any more battles.

An old manor house had been turned into a hospital. The foyer was lined with benches, which were filled with walking wounded: arms, legs, bellies, and heads bandaged; eyes burned out by gas, flesh torn by wire, limbs smashed by shells. So many ways to injure a man. Low murmurs echoed—the drone of distant honeybees, Molly thought. Every now and then a louder groan punctuated, and a nurse would run to see who had made the sound of agony, to help if she could. The hospital didn't have enough doctors and nurses, so the soldiers had to wait their turns. Molly did what she could to help. She had the skills to change a bandage or offer a drink, so she went to each soldier in turn, bearing water and a smile. Mostly, she tried to keep their spirits up. She stayed busy—wanted to stay busy. If she worried about these soldiers, maybe she wouldn't worry so much about Joshua.

> The boat arrived in Dover, like something out of a dream. Like they'd traveled from one world to another, from a city of blood back home to a land of green pastures and gray fog.

Private Andrews sat at the end of a bench, staring at nothing.

"Can I write a letter for you?"

She met his gaze, but he wasn't looking back, not right away. He needed a few moments to focus, to find himself.

"Letter?"

"Letter home. I'm writing letters home, for the soldiers. Is there anyone who'd like to know you'll be home soon?"

She had seen too many wounds, too much blood to flinch. Flecks of blood stained her long blue dress and white apron. He stared at her like he expected her to flinch away. She made it her purpose to be a mirror to them. They only knew they were injured, that their faces were bandaged, that they were in pain. Their fears multiplied. She wanted to tell them that they were all right. That they could face the world.

"All right," he said. "Yeah, that'd be all right."

She readied her notebook and pencil. Wrote the date, and waited.

Private Andrews didn't speak.

"What's the matter?" Molly said.

He shrugged a little, stretching his face under the bandage, wincing at pain. "I don't know what to say."

"Well, who are you writing to? Parents? Sister? Sweetheart?"

Again, his gaze faded, unfocused. She was about to speak again when he smiled suddenly. "Sweetheart. Back in Nottingham. Haven't seen her in a year."

"That's hard. So many of the boys have sweethearts waiting for them. But you'll be home soon. You'll see her soon."

"Then I should send her the letter. Tell her I'll be home."

"That's right." Give them hope. Had to be a way to find hope among all this muck and blood. Looking at their damaged faces gave her hope—it was possible to return from the front alive. "What's her name?"

He hesitated a moment, then said, "Nancy. Say, 'Dear Nancy.'"

He spoke, and she wrote.

"Nancy. Been a rough couple of months. Been a rough year, really. Almost didn't come through it. But that's all done now, isn't it? Have to move on, look ahead. That's what they all keep telling me. Have to see what kind of job I can do with only one eye. But you're there waiting for me, eh? It'd be nice to have something to look forward to."

Lots of hopes and dreams, that was what the boys talked about. Been a rough time on the front, but what was the point in dwelling on that. Private Andrews's hopes and dreams were vague, but they were there.

"That's it, I guess," he said finally. "Say, 'All my love, Ned.'"

She wrote his name. "What's she look like?"

"Eh?"

"Nancy. What's she look like?"

"Oh—she's a small girl. This high, maybe." He put his hand at the level of her shoulder. "Yellow hair, brown eyes. Smiling. She's happy, always laughing. She works in a shop. A hat shop, on the high street."

"She sounds lovely."

"Yeah." Didn't quite smile. He pressed his lips into an expression filled with pain.

Molly folded the letter in half, and in half again. Tucked it in her pocket—a different pocket than the other letters she'd written that day.

Private Andrews saw the gesture. He said, "You need the address, don't you? You need to know where to send it."

"Yes, if you can tell me."

He didn't say anything. His good eye looked away. "There isn't really a Nancy."

She touched his arm. "I know. Most of the soldiers with wounds on the face, they ask me how they look. If anyone could ever love a man with such a horrible face. If their sweethearts will still love them. You never asked me that."

Just as his smile was filled with pain, so was his short laugh. "Silly, isn't it? Making it all up so you wouldn't think I'm a pathetic sot."

"Private Andrews, you're all right. Maybe you'll find her when you get home. Maybe that's why you made it through the war."

"But tell me." His smile turned sly. "Could a girl ever love a man with a face like this?"

She leaned in close. "I'll tell you a secret. You could have the most perfect face in the world and even then it's not your face she'll be in love with."

"You sure about that?"

She nodded, smiled. Stayed bright, stayed hopeful.

"You have a sweetheart, then? Someone waiting for you back home," he said.

She shook her head.

"Then you don't have a sweetheart."

"I do. But I'm waiting for him. He's on the front. I expect to see him every day, brought in on a stretcher."

She tried to be a mirror for them, to show them hope. This time, he turned the hope back to her.

"He'll walk back to you on his own two legs," Private Andrews said. "Right as rain. You're too pretty to leave alone."

"Thanks. Can I get you anything? Glass of water maybe?"

"No, I'll be all right."

Molly had a few moments after supper before she'd be needed again. Behind one of the tents outside the hospital, among the trunks of medical stores, she found an empty bottle, still with its cork. It was a sense of adventure that made her do it. A sense of justice, maybe. A world of hopelessness became liberating. You could do anything, try anything, because what could go wrong? What did she, or any of them, have to lose? Nothing.

She rolled up the letter to Nancy and stuffed it into the bottle. Sealed the cork. Then she went to the water, out by the piers where the ships came in. As hard as she could, she threw the bottle into the choppy gray waters of the Channel. She didn't see the splash. Only a ripple and it was gone, lost in the waves.

She did it because it seemed a shame just to tear it up and throw it out. Maybe someone would find it. Someone ought to have the letter.

In a month, Molly was on the boat that carried Private Andrews back to England. As always she was there to help the soldiers, make sure they were well, that they kept their injured arms

Continued on page 83

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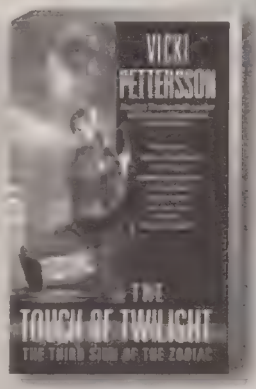

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HARPER

spiderse

Do you want to ride with the Wild Hunt? The price is high and the ride can be very short.

BY LIZ WILLIAMS

ILLUSTRATION BY HUAN TRAN

I was born dead on a midwinter's night. I remember my mother, wailing. They wrapped me in a linen cloth and I remember that, too—the softness of it over my unbreathing mouth. Then they put me in a yew box to contain any evil that might rise like swamp mist from my skin, and that evening, near dusk with the last flash of a late sun reddening the thorn branches on the high slopes of Heimfell, my father carried me up to the crossroads and put me on the mounting block. The dead can't hear anything except the wind but I know that his face was wet, as he bade me goodbye.

Then I waited.

I knew they'd come. I'd been told they would, before they squeezed me into channels of blood and struts of bone, slid me between earth and sky and walls of flesh, confined me in something small and dead.

"If you don't breathe in the first minutes of light," they said in their one-voice-that-was-three, "then the Hunt will come for you."

It didn't sound so bad. I did not like what I'd heard of the midworld; it sounded lumpy and clotted like sour mild, earth always clinging to your feet, weighing you down. And I didn't want to leave the Hall. I said so.

The Hunt only

"That's the problem," they said. "You've been here too long. The Hall's growing into you and you're growing into it." The Eldest took my hand and held it above the cauldron's smoke to a shaft of starlight. "See?"

I suppose she was right. Now that she mentioned it, I could see the green threads of holly and ivy and oak, twining around what would have been my sinews. And I suppose my arms and fingers did look more like twigs and branches. But I was happy here. The Hall was my home. I liked living in its forest eaves, high in its canopy near the sun and the moon. I didn't see why I had to be rooted in human flesh but they said that everything had to be planted in earth if it was to grow.

And so I sank down into a room of flesh, but I didn't like it, and when at last I was shoved forth into midnight I held my breath and hoped to be hauled back up again to the Hall. I didn't really believe that they'd just leave me there, in my dead baby body.

Instead, I stayed stuck in chilly stiffness, waiting for the Hunt.

I knew when they came. I knew it must be them, from the voices in the wind, an old, cold breath.

"Another! There's another!"

Cries and laughter, and then a whispering voice like the sound the dead leaves made, rustling on the crossroads' earth. "A child made of dead flesh. Yes. We'll take her as a gift to us."

I, leaf-light, lifted up onto the saddle of a horse and secured with a leather thing. I got my first glimpse of them then: horses of shadow, of sinew and bone, with something writhing at the head of the herd —two horses? No, one, spide-legged and with a long hand holding the reins from beneath the night billow of a cloak. The ones who rode alongside all smiled and their teeth and eyes were bright as moonlight. As the horse that carried me leaped up from the crossroads I took my first breath and it burned into my lungs like smoke.

It wasn't the Hall. But it wasn't as bad as a life spent looking after pigs, either.

They made much of me. I grew fast, and I had skin like new milk, bloodless and smooth. They crowned me with mistletoe and gave me catskin gloves to wear. Even the one with the hood, the one who rode Spiderhorse, gave me more than a passing glance and stuck a feather from a raven's wing behind my ear. The feather told me things and sometimes it made me laugh out loud. I had waterfall hair and the other women showed me how to braid it into plaits, which brushed the ground as I walked and made it ring out like frost.

I earned a reputation for being somewhat heartless.

I missed the Hall at first, and the Tree, and the Three, but as I grew the memories became small and dim like the far stars and adult things took their place. I rode at the end of the Hunt, on something brown with a coat that was the texture of moss. It tried to bite me in the leg, but it only did that once. It did not seem to enjoy sky-riding—I don't know where they found it, but Holda, one of the women who helped me braid my hair, said that it had come from the bottom of a lake. I could believe this easily enough. Sometimes it seemed to shift underneath me, turning from horse to otter, and then to a mass that stank of waterweed and smelled of mud.

My waterfall hair reached to its thick heels when I stood beside it. I didn't want to be stuck riding a waterweed thing all my life, or what passed for it. I liked Frigga's tuft-eared cat, or Holda's black mare with her glittering starlit eyes. But most of all, I wanted to ride Spiderhorse.

It was just a wish, nothing more than that. But wishes are like thistledown seeds when the Hunt rides: they get blown on the wind of horses' hooves, and take root in odd places.

I certainly didn't mean to steal Wotan's horse. It just worked out that way.

It was my tenth Hunt, or thereabouts. Easy enough to count: the warriors gave me a silver bracelet every time I rode. They asked for a different kind of ride in exchange, but I didn't mind that. It was as much fun as the waterweed steed, and the feather whispered to me all night long while the warriors snored.

On that tenth Hunt, we rode out over Heimfell. It was winter again, not long after Yule, and even in a land that rang with church bells there was still enough room for us: still holly and ivy round the lintel, still the midnight crossroads' gifts. The long back of Heimfell glittered with snow and my waterweed pony plodded on the sparkling air as if we were trotting across mud. When I dug my heels in, so did it. I looked all the way up the curve of the Hunt and saw Spiderhorse prance and dance as the ravens' wings blotted out the moon and I thought: *That's what I want.*

I didn't mean to say it out loud. No one heard me except Waterweed—and the feather, which caught on a sudden gust of icy air and fluttered down. I grabbed at it and almost fell. I watched it spiral down, down, through the hooves of the Hunt to the summit of Heimfell, where it arrowed into the snow and quivered into stillness. I saw the feather vanish and a shadowy stain spread out across the snow. I didn't know what it meant at the time. I should have remembered about wishes.

Wotan started to take more of an interest in me after that, and this should have worried me more than it did, too. But I was a girl, and popular, and wanting to be so, and of course it turned my head.

And Wotan was—well, Wotan. It's hard to describe his kind, because it's hard to look at them closely, or for long. Think of someone dark and sparkling, with an amber eye and wolf's pelt hair. Think of someone who can blot out the moon.

It didn't take long and I knew it would only be the once. He was gentle, at first. He gave me mead in a glass cup and a comb made of human bone to clasp my hair. But lying with him was not like lying with a warrior, or with a human man (what? I'd had an experimental phase). He was ice cold and when he entered me it burned and hurt. I was too proud to cry out and I think he liked that, though eventually I did so, but with the pleasure behind the pain.

I thought he'd probably got me pregnant. He usually did, with his girls, and quite often they lived through the birth. He did not go to sleep like a warrior, did not sprawl snoring. He lay on his back, still as stone, and I saw the reflection of his amber eye upon the ceiling, like a little coal. Gradually the reflection faded, and when I dared to look I saw that the eye had faded from amber to shadow, although it was still open. I reached down between my legs and found that I was mistletoe-sticky, but there was no blood. That, Holda had told me before I went to Wotan's chamber, was a very good sign.

I thought: *I want this child. But I want to ride Spiderhorse, too.*

Well, no time like the present.

ever takes the dead.

I slid from the whispering sheets. Wotan's ravens were sitting on the bedposts: I hadn't seen them when I came in. But when I sought a closer look, fearing immediate betrayal, I saw that they were nothing more than rough carvings of black wood. So I kept silent and slipped on. One of the advantages of being born dead is that you still need to breathe, but not often. I barely stirred the shadows as I went through the door and down the hall, and through the mead-hall where the dogs and the warriors muttered in mead-soaked sleep, and out into the night to where the horses were stabled.

My pony was kept at the end nearest to the mead-hall. Water that smelled of pond-weed leaked from under the door. I went on, along the row of doors to the far end, the end closest to the edge of things. The stars seemed very close, here, and the moonlight fell hard on my skin. I looked down at my fingers, still sticky with mistletoe, and they gleamed silver. I could feel Spiderhorse inside his stall. I heard him stamp one of his eight feet, that are said to be shod with human bone to enable his master to ride the sky-roads, and it rang on the floor of the stable like church bells. I shivered to hear it, but I still walked on to the farthest stable, where everything stopped. I looked out onto a black sea, star-speckled. Very far away, out across the edge of things, I thought I could see the trunk of the Tree, a column of dark against dark, but I wasn't sure. I'd ride there, I thought to myself, and take a look. Maybe I'd even drop in on the Hall, and I smiled at the little, rooty thing I had once been as I looked down at my milky hands. Strong enough to hold Sleipnir's bridle? I hoped so. Time to find out. I could almost hear the beat of ravens' wings at my back, catch the gleam of a wolf's eye, wakening.

I opened the stable door. Spiderhorse seemed a lot bigger, close to. It was hard to see how the eight legs joined his body; the muscles seemed to be in constant movement, sliding beneath the shining skin. Impossible to tell what color he was, too: sometimes he looked as black as the night sea, or as gray as the winter dusk, and then a clear glistening white like wet bone. I blinked, and there was only an eight-legged moving shadow, brown as ash-wood. Spiderhorse arched a long neck and looked at me and his eyes were like a man's eyes, filled with a wicked knowing.

I didn't give myself time to think, or I would have turned and fled. I snatched the saddle from the wall—made of warriors' skins, or so they said, and heavy enough to make my knees buckle. I threw it over Spiderhorse's back and drew the girth tight. The horse did nothing, but he watched me all the while. Then the bridle—made of women's braids, or so they said, and it snaked in my hands like lightning. Over the horse's head, and then it was time to put my foot in the stirrup and leap, a jump that felt sun-high. Spiderhorse stamped his foot, once, and I turned him and rode him through the door and out over the edge. He gave a long shrieking cry as we went and his eight hooves rang out across the star road—I could see it now a little way below, many packed points of light, grain scattered across the heavens' floor. I risked a glance over my shoulder and saw that far behind us, the lights were indeed going on. Wotan's hall had woken up. I took a deep breath, and rode on.

What was it like, riding Spiderhorse? It was more pleasure than any I've known, speed and power running through me like water, stronger than the pleasure of the warrior's ride, stronger than the pleasure of killing. I would have ridden Sleipnir to the end of time, to Ragnarok, forever, if I'd had the chance.

But the chance wasn't to come. Something brushed my face and I looked up to see the first leaves of the Tree. Then there was the sharpness of pain and when I put my hand to my cheek, it came away bloody. Spiderhorse charged through the leaves, and I ducked, leaning low over the horse's steaming neck as we went on, past the vast column of the Trunk and through the other side. If my old Hall was there, I did not see it. But I did see Mid-Earth below, a tapestry of silver and black with the hard ball of the moon hanging over it, and then a burst of blinding light as the sun rolled up over the world's edge. The light blinded me so that I cast my arm in front of my face, just in time to see Wotan's Hunt ride up behind me, with a yellow eye gleaming from under the hood of someone standing at the prow of Freya's cat chariot.

I shouldn't have let go of the reins.

Of course, Spiderhorse reared.

Of course, I fell.

I saw the whole length of the Tree as I went, crown to trunk to root, with the sun's light striking off the leaves as the morning world roared to meet me. A winter world still, with the waterfalls frozen, and the land bitter under the frost. And as I fell, I felt myself grow small, dwindling down, my hair streaming behind me like a comet's tail and then evaporating into fire as my flesh burned painlessly away and I grew yet smaller, soft as a frog.

I went straight through a roof, sending the snow that covered it hissing into steam, and landed somewhere dark and hot and wet. I didn't realize what had happened at first, until I couldn't get out, and then I tried to scream, with my frog mouth, and could not.

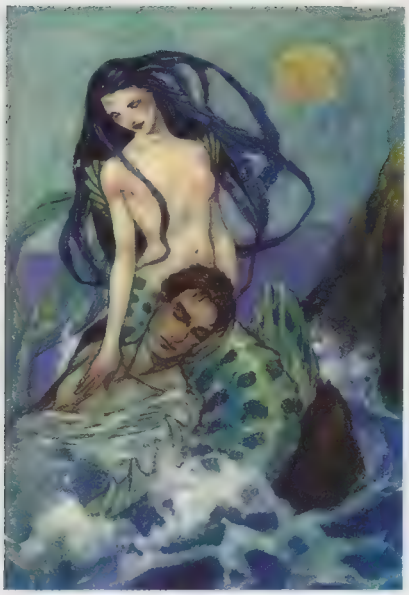
I did get out eventually. It took nine months, of chafing and regrets and pleading and cursing, until nature took its course and took pity on me. No one else was listening, after all. My new hostess squeezed me out into a midwife's hands, into a hovel's smoky air.

I'd already planned what to do. I'd done it before. But as I came into Mid-world for the second time, I opened my eyes and there was Wotan, standing on the other side of the fire. The yellow eye flared in the firelight with a bitter burn and it frightened me so much that I opened my mouth and shrieked.

That was that. The Hunt only ever takes the dead.

And that was seventeen years ago, now. I still dream of my root-life in the Hall, and of my time spent riding on the waterweed steed in the wake of the Hunt. But most of all, as I trudge the slopes of Heimfell after the pigs, I dream of riding Spiderhorse, especially in the spring when the black hooves of the ash-trees start springing new leaves.

I have never been touched by a man. I'm just as beautiful as I used to be in Wotan's mead hall, so there's been no lack of offers. But I've had to ask my father to turn them all down. He's indulged me so far, but the pregnancy—still concealed—is growing on. It's taken seventeen years, so far, to get to this point. I don't know how long it has to go, or what I will give birth to. Wotan's child, deep within, is silent, and tells me nothing. But when it is born, I know exactly what I will do. I'll take it to the midnight crossroads, in winter when the moon is dark, and together we'll wait for the beat of eight hooves, and the breath of cold on the wind. ❧



Fantastic PASSION

Rebecca Guay's paintings are infused with the spirit and emotion of her subjects.

BY KAREN HABER

"I don't think there was ever a time when I didn't want to be an artist," says Rebecca Guay. "I won a drawing contest in first grade, and right around that time, I discovered Wonder Woman and started to draw her everywhere. So, really early, I wanted to draw really specific stuff—princesses, fairies, and superheroes—everything that was fantasy- and comics-related.

"My mom had gone to art school so she was completely supportive of it. She was amazing. She had the courage to tell me 'You can do it, but you have to work really hard.'"

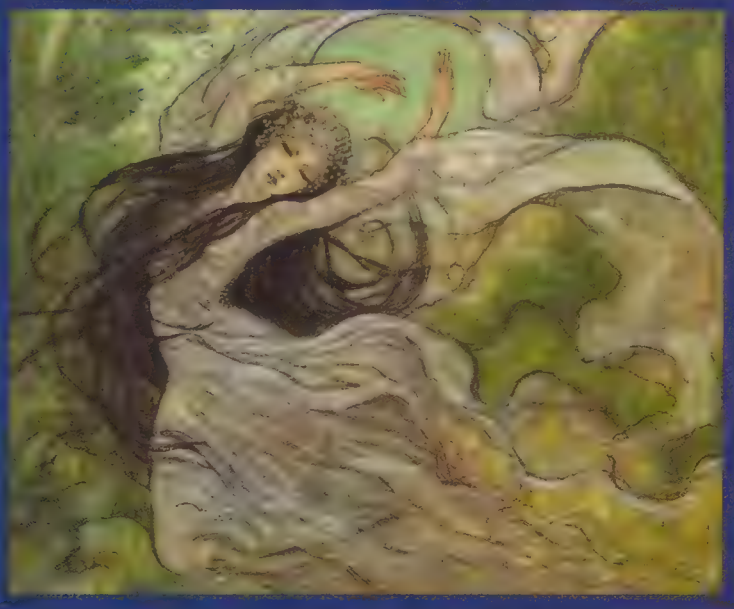
Rebecca listened to her mother, worked hard, attended Pratt Institute, and graduated with a degree in illustration. Right out of school she began to get work. "I was pretty lucky," she says. "I got published right away by *Cricket* magazine and a few others."

A friend with a job at Marvel Comics introduced her to the editors there. She got a cover assignment and then her friend offered her a job as an assistant. "So I got to know everyone at Marvel and they all got to know I wanted to do comics. I spent all my spare time preparing penciling demo pages."

Her break came when one of the editors who had seen some of Rebecca's penciling demos asked her to pencil a ten-page story—in three days—for *Spiderman*. Rebecca took a deep breath and plunged in.

"Basically, I didn't sleep," she says. She met her deadline and began to work as a penciler. "Being a comics penciler is like being in boot camp for an artist. I had never done it before. I spent a lot of time looking at other artists' work. Mike Mignola was a great influence on me.

"Penciling is a very hard job, a constant grind. I would not go back to it. It's very high pressure work: you do a page a day and you have to draw on a very tight formula so the inker can read your lines. But it's a very good boot camp kind of place to be. It's a grind but it's perfect for young artists with high energy. If you had any flaws in your ability to draw they go pretty quickly when you're a penciler." She adds with a laugh, "Penciling didn't diminish my love for comics.



I still work in comics, but not as a penciler."

Rebecca made good use of her tryout for *Spiderman*. "Eventually, I took those ten pages over to Karen Berger at DC/Vertigo. It was a case of right place, right time. They needed a penciler for *Black Orchid*."

Rebecca spent a year as the artist for *Black Orchid*. But she was casting a wider net as well. "While I was doing *Black Orchid* I was sending out my portfolio to try to get painted work." The assignments flowed in: White Wolf and *Magic The Gathering* came calling with assignments for gaming cards and book covers. She painted over 150 Magic cards and has traveled widely, meeting fans and signing cards. Her work made a big impression on the fans. "The Magic fans are *so* loyal," she says fondly. "So passionate. It's a gift. I'm really grateful." (She also painted trading cards for DC Comics and Tops Inc.).

By the time her gig at DC/Vertigo ended, she was ready to go freelance and moved on to painted comics. Among the graphic novels she has painted are *Green Lantern: Emerald Nights* (DC Comics, 2001), *Veils* (DC/Vertigo Comics, 2000), the 1998 Eisner Award nominee *Sandman: The Book of Destiny* (DC/Vertigo Comics), and *Magic The Homelands* (Acclaim Comics, 1995).

Rebecca also pursued her dream of writing and painting children's books. But that meant diversification of her portfolio. Ten years ago there were rigid divisions between children's and comics illustration. Children's book editors disdained artists who worked in comics, and at the time it was a challenge to artists like Rebecca withwide-ranging goals.

"In comics you have to work at a level of detail in anatomy that you just don't have to do in children's books," she remembers.

"I had to have two separate portfolios for children's books and comics. The two simply didn't meet in those days, and if I wanted to work in both I had to keep them separate."

Happily for Rebecca and other artists, that bias has lessened considerably over the past decade. "There's been a real change, which is great, but it was a different, stratified world then."

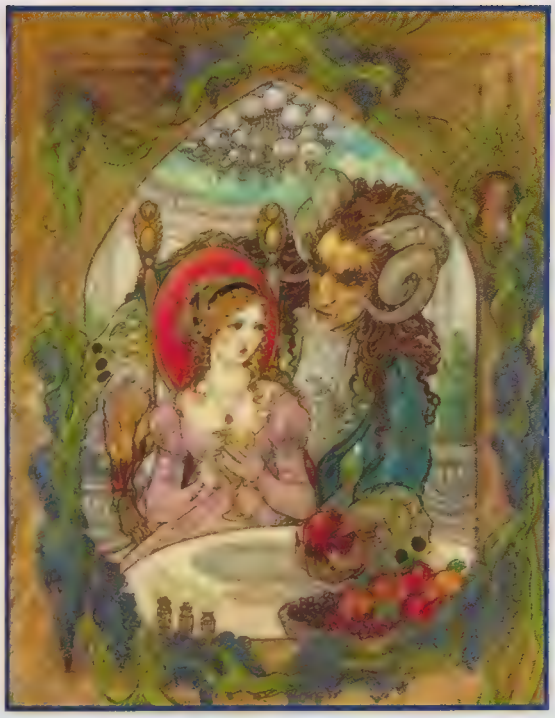
In 2003 her first children's book, *Goddesses: A World of Myth and Magic*, written by Burleigh Muten, was published by Barefoot Books, to critical acclaim. Around that time she achieved gallery representation with R. Michelson Galleries (www.rmichelson.com) in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Rebecca followed up *Goddesses*

with *The Barefoot Book of Ballet Stories* by Jane Yolen & Heidi E.Y. Semple (Barefoot Books, 2004) and *Muti's Necklace* by Louise Hawes (Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

She has also painted book covers for such authors as Ursula K. LeGuin (the *Earthsea* series), Bruce Coville (the *Unicorn Chroni- cles*), Jackie French Koller (*The Keepers* series), and Susan Fletcher. Just published in England by Fernleigh Books—and coming soon to the U.S.—is a children's pop-up book of *Beauty and the Beast*. Current projects include *B Is for Ballet: A Dance Alphabet*, written by principal dancer Sonia Rodriguez and figure skater Kurt Browning for Sleeping Bear Press, and *The Last Dragon*, with Jane Yolen, for Vertigo Comics.

Rebecca's work was chosen "Best in Show" at Gen Con in 2004. she was elected "Best Artist" by *InQuest* magazine's Fan Choice Awards in 2005, and she was among the judges for the 2007 student show at the Society of Illustrators in New York City, where her paintings have also been exhibited.



Her influences include the Pre-Raphaelites, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Adolphe William Bouguereau, N.C. Wyeth, Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac, Alphonse Mucha, Rose O'Neil, Ellen Shippen-Green, and Kinuko Y. Craft.

What attracts her to a subject?

"I really have to discover the spirit of the character and make an emotional connection there, then ask myself: How can I do that? If I can't connect emotionally I don't feel I can do it justice.

"People may look at my work as ethereal, but it's not a word I tend to use to identify with my work. What interests me is emotion, the edgier, darker part of it. I love mythology and romantic stories, yes, but from an earthy and often gritty perspective."

Her website's main page features a powerful, beautiful painting of Orpheus and Eurydice, filled with light, movement, and emotion.

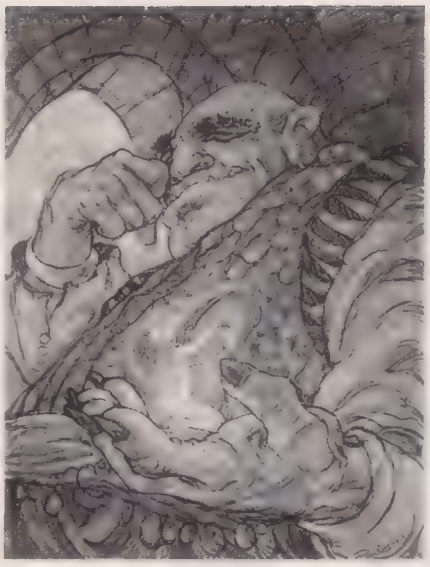
"Their story is so passionate, so dark, so wracked by pain," Rebecca says. "Those are the subjects that call to me. I love the complexity of it, the multifaceted view of a passionate moment. That's what draws me to a subject.

"Sometimes a poem will hit me, or a bit in a movie that resonates, or looking at art books. Myth also: the legend of Psyche, with all of that vulnerability, faith, love, trust, trouble."

Perhaps it's appropriate—and undeniably romantic—that someone who loves and paints legendary mythological figures has royal blood flowing in her veins. Although it's not something she talks about, Rebecca is a direct descendant of Emperor Charlemagne of France.

The visual possibilities of the work also attract her. "I love to explore rich color, to play with pattern, detail, and hue. And I love skin; its luminousity, how flesh captures every color. I particularly enjoy portraying the earthiness in skin."

Although Rebecca began her work as a watercolorist—and penciler — she has grown in a different technical direction over the past decade. "I started as a straight watercolorist but I've switched to a totally different technique. I work in pencil, acryla-gouache and oil, on paper or paper mounted on panel. I do a lot of glazing, working out of a neutral ground, always letting the drawing show through. I don't want to cover every line with paint: I never want to lose the gestural stuff.



"So I'll work up the layers of the acrylic, and about halfway, or two-thirds of the way through, shift to oil. There's nothing like oil for super rich color, and transparency."

Although she experiments with the digital side, she prefers to use traditional crafts and hand skills. "There's a big love affair going on between artists and digital tools right now. I'd like to see digital stuff used more as tools toward finishing a painting than the whole thing.

"Painting is all about gestures, how gesture in a drawing creates an emotion. Think about what makes a body turn or gives breath to a figure. If you don't have a trained eye and don't know how to draw, if you're a bad draftsman, that will show regardless of your medium.

"You must develop the emotional side of yourself as an artist, and that's nothing you can get doing digital work alone. You have to develop it. It takes years of looking and painting."

Rebecca Guay has been looking and painting fearlessly since kindergarten. However, she might not agree to the description of herself as totally fearless.

"I don't know if this is inherent to artists, but there's constant self-doubt. It's a roller-coaster ride. You have to have huge self-confidence to take that leap every day to do something creative. But I'm always thinking I can do better than that. I guess it gives me motivation."

You can check out Rebecca's website at: www.rebeccaguay.com

The Rest-room Mur-ders

Bored at work?

Read this piece for some helpful tips on livening up your day!

BY PENI R. GRIFFIN
ILLUSTRATION BY TONY SHASTEEN

SHASTEEN

Kathy created the haunting out of boredom, and Emily let her.

No matter how hot and drought-stricken the real world, the bank annex always felt like a rainy day. In the vault on the second floor, the temps formed teams of two: a thrower to match the credit cards with the mailers, and a catcher to check the match and stuff the envelope. Emily had done this job one week a month since her retirement. She found Kathy, a college student temping over the summer, to be a promising partner. Between them, they put out a tray and a half for the next team's one.

The supervisor, Rebecca, did random spot checks and controlled the radio. Her favorite station had a playlist about an hour and a half long, stretched to three hours by commercials. The older temps shared tips on work, romance, and child-rearing. The younger temps shared the soap-operatic details of their personal lives.

Bank policy stipulated that the vault's grilled door be locked (but Rebecca didn't quite latch it) and the temps could only leave during two fifteen-minute breaks and a half-hour lunch. This forced them to waste breaks in line at the restroom and to eat in a windowless cafeteria instead of at any of the restaurants within walking distance. The bank's permanent staff avoided them as they ate, as if unemployment might be catching. People with calls to make ate fast in order to use their cell phones, which had to be switched off on company time.

"I can't believe this place," said Ashley, a newbie, poking at her rubbery spaghetti. "There's rules against everything! If they're going to make everyone go at the same time they ought to have bigger restrooms."

"Maybe that one around the corner's bigger," said another newbie, Karen.

Emily shook her head. "That's kept locked."

"How come?"

"Because of the murder," said Kathy.

Emily watched the shocked interest of the others and kept quiet. Why spoil Kathy's fun? "What murder?" demanded Ashley.

"Sh!" Kathy glanced around.

Ashley dropped her voice to a whisper. "What murder?"

"Don't you remember the restroom murders? Ten years ago or so? Well, that's the restroom!"

"I was in grade school then. I didn't listen to the news."

Emily took a bite of her sandwich to keep from smiling. Kathy said: "One of the data entry people brought a butcher's knife in her purse and waylaid people as they came into the restroom."

"I never heard of this," said Karen, "and I've lived here my whole life."

"They caught her red-handed and she killed herself, so there was no trial," said Kathy.

"How many did she get?" asked Shelley.

"Five, I think, wasn't it?" said Ashley. "Now you describe it, it sounds kind of familiar."

"I don't remember," admitted Kathy with a straight face. "But that's why they don't let people use the restrooms between breaks. If the victims had gone in a group, she wouldn't have gotten any."

"It's good to know there's a reason for some of this crap," said Karen. "But why lock it?"

"Because of the blood," said Kathy. "It won't come out."

"So remodel," said Shelley.

"They did remodel." Kathy leaned into the center of the table, and every other head at the table leaned in, too. "Refinished the walls, replaced the countertops, stalls, commodes, everything. But the blood kept coming back."

"I don't believe that," said Karen. "Where would it come from?"

If she got a chance to apply logic, the story would fall apart. Emily knew she should encourage that, but instead she said: "Eat up, girls. We have to be back in the vault in five minutes."

That afternoon, as they left the building—each woman stretching and turning her face to the hot, dry sun as she emerged—Emily caught up to Kathy, and said: "Restroom murders?"

"Nothing like a good story to make a job more interesting."

Her intended victim had been her supervisor, but people kept wandering in and she killed them to silence them.

True, but—"These things aren't easy to control once they get loose." Should she tell about that incident in the dorms? Fifty-year-old campus gossip. Kathy wouldn't be interested.

"So why didn't you call me on it?"

"It really is the most boring job in town, isn't it? See you tomorrow." She walked on, toward the hotel converted to low-income housing where she lived alone.

The next day, the other temps delegated Emily to request that Rebecca rotate radio stations from day to day. Rebecca refused. As they stood in line during the morning break, Shelley said: "I don't care how many people died. This was not the best solution."

"How'd she get up to five, anyway?" asked Karen. "You'd see blood as soon as you opened the door."

"Maybe not if she dragged them into a stall before slitting their throats," suggested Ashley.

"Somebody should have screamed," said Karen. "But I guess you wouldn't necessarily hear, would you? The washrooms are the only thing on that little hall."

"Somebody in the men's restroom should have heard before the murderer got up to five," said Shelley.

"I'm not sure it was five," said Kathy.

The floor receptionist—a new hire, barely out of high school—came out of a stall and went to the sink. "What murder?"

"The one in this building ten years ago," said Karen.

"Really?" The receptionist's eyes got wide.

"That's why the fourth-floor ladies' room is always locked," Ashley informed her. "A data entry clerk whacked out and killed a bunch of people in it, and now they can't get rid of the blood."

"Then why did they close the men's room, too?" asked the receptionist. "There wouldn't be any blood in there."

Emily looked at Kathy, and said: "I can tell you what I heard, but I'm not sure it's true."

"What?"

"I heard you can hear the screaming from the men's room. That's how they caught her, you know—a dishwasher heard screaming." One of the stalls cleared, and she went in.

Emily was glad when the assignment ended, though summers were lean times, with students flooding the cruddy-job market. Between assignments, she visited her friend Grace. The aftermath of the stroke made it hard to tell when she understood, but Emily sat by her and knitted and gossiped as if she did.

"Do you remember that rumor about the Peeping Tom?" She asked, the Monday after Kathy invented the murders. "How Alice confessed she'd made him up? But lingerie was disappearing,

and I saw him. Big man, with a scar, just like she said. He even left footprints! But nobody could have escaped from that hallway, not with all of us and the dean converging on it. So what do you think happened?"

Grace pointed at the corner of the room, or possibly the TV tray, and said "Tom," which might have referenced either the Peeping Tom or her late husband.

A month later, the agency called her to stuff envelopes. Emily sighed and went. The pension and Social Security wouldn't go far if she wound up like Grace.

Ashley threw like a pro and explained the restroom policy to newbies, complete with the murder story. When a couple of girls went to listen for screaming during lunch, Rebecca added verisimilitude by confronting them in anger. "We were trying to use the restroom," said one. "But it's locked."

"You should have used the one downstairs," sputtered Rebecca. "Don't poke into places where you don't belong."

"But why is it locked?"

"That's none of your concern," said Rebecca. Emily wondered whether she knew, herself.

The rumor had spread from the receptionist to the permanent staff. Emily and Kathy listened with interest, exchanging covert glances, as the story circulated and grew, a sentence at a time—a low-voiced remark under cover of cafeteria noise, a comment in a restroom or on a cell phone.

The data entry clerk had wigged out due to the policy of giving data entry people a half-hour break at eight-thirty in the morning and none in the afternoon.

Her intended victim had been her supervisor, but people kept wandering in and she killed them to silence them.

The supervisor had deliberately driven her crazy, blocking her attempts at promotion.

"I told you it wouldn't be controllable," said Emily, as she and Kathy left on Friday.

"That's cool," said Kathy. "This is lots more interesting than anything I could have come up with."

When envelope-stuffing time returned in August, Emily joyfully missed it. A professor had found the shorthand diaries of the computer pioneer of whom he was writing a biography. Emily, the only temp fluent in shorthand, bargained the hourly rate up as high as the market would bear. For five months, work studies addressed her as "ma'am," the professor discussed the transcripts with her and raved about how invaluable she was, and the department manager, a graduate of Emily's alma mater, got her a parking pass and a card to eat in the university cafeteria. They ate together and traded college stories, though their reminiscences came twenty years apart. The manager said that Emily's old dorm was haunted by a Peeping Tom with a scarred face who had died jumping off the roof when the girls he spied on ganged up to corner him.

Emily hadn't realized how much she'd missed job satisfaction until she had it again, but the money was good, too. She did her Christmas shopping and socked the rest into savings. This turned out to be wise when a sinus problem turned into bronchitis, then pneumonia. Grace died in January, and she missed the funeral, as well as four months of temp work.

Emily's next assignment for the bank, in May, was in the third-floor data entry area, where she and Kathy were assigned the oldest, slowest machines. The clammy air troubled her sinuses, and she feared for her lungs. Something about the timing of the mail caused the ridiculous half-hour break in the morning, which at least meant they were allowed random restroom access in the afternoon. The staff always went to the restroom in pairs now; even the men, which was awkward for Manuel, the only male data entry clerk.

The supervisor, Tina, had a goal of maximum output with minimum speech. She explained the work badly and hated answering questions, but interrupted when Emily tried to ask somebody else to clarify. "It's perfectly simple if you'll follow instructions," she snapped. "I'd think somebody your age could figure it out."

"I think the atmosphere's gotten worse," Emily said to Kathy as they washed their hands after a lunch spent listening to people yell into their cell phones, which all seemed to be on the fritz.

"At least we're on a floor with windows," Kathy said. This was a joke, as the data entry area was every bit as open to the outdoors as the vault had been.

"That's the rumor," croaked Emily. "I think those things that look like windows from the outside are mirrors. I'm not sure I don't like the vault better."

"Yeah, this supervisor is a piece of work," agreed Kathy. "I couldn't believe she talked to you like that!"

"It doesn't matter," lied Emily, as something warm dripped on her hand. She looked down, and found a bright red spot on her knuckles. "What the—"

"Ouch! What'd you do to yourself?" Kathy asked.

"Nothing." Emily wiped the blood off—no injury. They looked up to see another drop collect, quivering, in the crack between the acoustical tiles, before dropping into the sink.

"Th-the pipes must be rusty," said Kathy.

The drop was bright and thick, not rusty at all. Emily said: "We're right under the murder restroom."

"There isn't any murder restroom." A third drop fell.

They reported the dripping to Tina, who told them to mind their own business and she would take care of it. This turned out to mean closing the third-floor restrooms. Ripples of story spread throughout the building, though Emily and Kathy told no one else.

The next morning, Tina assembled temps and staff and shrilled at them. "The fourth-floor restroom has malfunctioned and leaked into the third-floor," she said. "This is a perfectly normal event. It has come to Management's attention that someone is spreading rumors. There is no foundation for any of them. I have been working in this building for fifteen years, and no one has ever been injured here."

"How exactly is the restroom malfunctioning?" asked Emily.

"The pipes have rusted. That's all."

"So it's not true that the restrooms on that floor are permanently locked?" Kathy asked, possibly hoping to flush out the real story behind that mysterious closure.

"That's not your concern!" Tina appeared not to notice the effect of this peremptory dismissal on her audience. "Do your work and Management will deal with everything else."

"Yeah, that'll work," muttered Manuel, as they turned away.

The half-hour morning break, though it came when no one needed one and prevented their having one when they needed it desperately, allowed for a certain amount of conversation over bad coffee in the cafeteria. Frowning workmen came and went down the restroom hall, and permanent staff huddled around coffee urns cheek-by-jowl with temps, shouting over construction noises. Dust irritated Emily's respiratory system. "What's the problem with this restroom?" asked Kathy; but all she got was her own story, embellished.

"They won't even let anyone go down that hall," said Manuel. "If you do, you might see one of the victims, or blood coming out from under the door."

"I've lived here my whole life," said Emily. "I don't remember this in the news."

"The bank covered it up, because that supervisor had been picking on her, and the murderer'd been trying to get psych treatment to be covered by insurance for months. They paid off the victims' families to avoid a lawsuit." The senior staff clerk spoke with confidence.

"It gets under Tina's skin bad," said Manuel, "because she got promoted into the murdered supervisor's place."

"Ten years ago?" Kathy asked.

"Yeah, that's why she's in such a bad mood all the time. She's tried for promotion like eight times."

"Aren't you afraid they'll fire you for telling us this?" Emily asked.

"Let 'em." Manuel lowered his voice. "This job sucks."

The third-floor restrooms were still closed when Kathy and Emily

left that day. "I think I created a monster," said Kathy. "But it's not as if you could make the atmosphere any worse than Management already had. And it's not the story's fault the pipes rusted."

"That wasn't rust water, and you know it," said Emily.

"I don't know what else it could be," said Kathy. "Blood? Where would it come from?"

"When you're as old as I am, you'll know that just because you don't understand something, that doesn't make it untrue."

The next day, as the clerks waited for the elevator after lunch, a workman charged out of the side hall, yelling: "No way, man! You can't make me go back in there! I quit!" He vanished down the stairwell, letting the door bang behind him. Other workmen drifted out, muttering. The supervisor bellowed: "All right, back to work! There's nothing to see!"

"But we did see it," said the workman closest to Emily.

"See what?" she asked.

"The lady," he replied. "With the slit throat. Walked right through him. I—"

"Back to work, guys!" The supervisor jerked her informant by the elbow. "Or do you want to explain to the unemployment office how you got fired for hallucinations on the job?" He glared at the clerks. "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"We just want to know what's going on," said Manuel.

"Nothing that concerns you."

The food service people heard screams every day that week.

Emily and Kathy started eating outside in the clean, dry spring heat, on a bench near the entrance. "You don't suppose there really was a murder here?" Kathy asked Emily.

Emily shook her head. "You can't keep a mass murder out of the press. Besides, ten years ago, my boss Jim was doing a lot of workplace class-action. This story would've been all over the industry."

"But the haunting had to come from somewhere."

"Most offices are haunted, more or less."

Kathy blew out a breath. "That's true. The janitors at the insurance company I worked in last year wouldn't go onto the ninth floor alone. They said guys in suits walked through walls there."

"Probably former tenants who had heart attacks on the job." That was how Jim died, precipitating her retirement. "My firm was in a converted Queen Anne residence where the previous owner didn't like the drapes to be open in the afternoon, and she was forever fiddling with things in the break room." Maybe the old lady and Jim haunted the place together now. Emily liked that idea.

"So, okay, lots of places are haunted, but—that's all good fun. Not like this."

"No," said Emily. "Most places aren't miserable. Can you imagine being trapped here for your whole afterlife?"

"Maybe we should just never come back."

"I'll keep coming if they keep calling. If you don't know how to work computers, you take what you can get."

"You're working a computer now."

"Data entry's just typing and ten-key. I can't do all that stuff with mice and programs and net access."

"Oh, sure you can. The agency will give you lessons."

"I'm too old a dog for that. Don't you worry about me. I can take anything this place can dish out."

But could she? The pneumonia had weakened more than her lungs. She sometimes lost track of what she was doing, even at home, and a mysterious tremor invaded her hands. But when Joyce from the agency called with the envelope-stuffing assignment, she said: "I hope you can make it. We're having trouble filling jobs at that bank."

"I'm not surprised," said Emily. "They have the worst rules I've ever worked under."

"I know, and it's gotten worse. Something about not enough restrooms. People are quitting left and right. The good news is, they pay better rates now."

Emily agreed to stuff at double minimum wage; but her tremor persisted, and she had to concentrate to match the numbers. Kathy was back, too. "You shouldn't be here," Emily said. "You can get better jobs than this."

"Joyce practically begged me," said Kathy. "And there's circumstances." She didn't elaborate, and Emily didn't pry.

The staff was jumpy: the supervisors shrill, the workers sullen. All of the other temps were new, giggly teens who barely looked at the cards. Rebecca locked people's purses in a cabinet, refused to answer questions, kept the radio turned up too loud, and latched the grille. New rules restricted movement between departments, and all the restrooms were locked, with supervisors holding the keys. Rebecca was called away for meetings three or four times a day, and hardly ever did spot checks.

Despite the new rules, Kathy and Emily heard plenty of gossip during restroom breaks, on the elevators, and during Rebecca's absences. The newbies delighted in recounting the latest manifestations reported by the food servers—screams, apparitions with slit throats or stab wounds, bloodstains on the carpet. Manuel had stepped in blood the previous week and walked out without giving notice. The murder restrooms were to be torn out, to be replaced by storage, as soon as the bank found a contractor that wouldn't bid the job through the roof.

After the afternoon break, Rebecca stood behind Emily for five minutes (Emily timed her) before saying: "You need to work faster."

"Perhaps I could if I were willing to make more mistakes," said Emily. I was a career woman before you were born, missy. I had a better job than you, and I did it better. Her hands shook so she almost dropped the card.

"You're the slowest team in the vault today," said Rebecca.

"Perhaps you'd like her to do spot checks," suggested Kathy.

"I'll decide when spot checks are needed. You do what you're paid for," said Rebecca, moving on to loom over the next pair, who were discussing fingernail polish. "Less chatter, more work."

Emily held her hands steady, her breath rasping. Stupid body. Stupid economy. Stupid world, betraying her to an old age of temping in clammy vaults and being polite to tinpot dictators. A car commercial that had already played three times this hour dissolved into static. Rebecca fiddled with the station, and the knob sparked, making her jump back swearing and shaking her hand. The newbies dissolved into laughter.

Kathy came to work looking suffused the next day. They took the stairs rather than the elevator at lunch, though Emily was aware of how slowly she had to go down them, so she could start talking as soon as possible without staff overhearing. "I went Web surfing last night," Kathy told her. "There wasn't anything about this bank and I had to wade through a lot of crap. But I found out what's happening! It's called a poltergeist. You don't need a dead person to haunt. Just a bunch of miserable repressed people."

"We've got that in spades," said Emily, settling on the bench and spreading a napkin across her lap. "But how does it work?"

Kathy unwrapped her sandwich. "The theory is that repressed energy bursts out unconsciously, causing noises, movements of objects, apparitions, and sometimes small fires."

"That'd explain a lot of office hauntings," said Emily; but she was thinking about the Peeping Tom. "I've never been in an office where energy didn't get repressed. You've got to, or people would fight all the time. So that would be enough to fuel minor hauntings. But this place was always like the Gulag, and when you gave the repressed energy something coherent to work with, it started busting out all over."

"Well, don't mention fires to anybody, okay? I don't want to be responsible for the building burning down."

"You wouldn't be responsible. It was never a happy building."

"I've made it worse."

"Management made it worse. If they want to restore order, they should relax their rules. Letting people go to the restroom as needed would relieve pressure in more ways than one."

Emily thought about poltergeists as she fixed supper that night. Repressed tension. A bunch of girls in a hothouse of a college, soldiers coming home. Every girl in her class had been officially thrilled

that the men were returning, but what about the jobs the girls had trained for, which would now go to those men—those boys who went away, died, killed, got themselves blown up and mutilated, as the girls they dated in high school turned into women without them?

Alice had made up the Peeping Tom story, but the fear had been real. The hostility had been real. Lingerie had disappeared. Emily and a dozen others had seen the scarred face at the window. A nonexistent Peeping Tom had left real footprints.

And the house-proud ghost in the Queen Anne had really closed the drapes. Had Emily spent her entire professional life participating in the creation of hauntings?

Next morning, an item in the back of the newspaper's metro section described the haunting of the annex with quotes from unidentified witnesses. According to the reporter, the only record of violence occurring on bank property was the suicide of a data entry clerk in the parking garage five years before. So Tina was a liar. No surprise.

"This place was always like the Gulag, and when you gave the repressed energy something coherent to work with, it started busting out all over."

Tina spotted a clerk hiding a newspaper in her overhead bin, and all hell broke loose. The temps shuffled envelopes and credit cards in the vault as turmoil surged outside. Rebecca had rings under her eyes and came and went repeatedly, fastening the grille and taking the key with her on departure, exclaiming with disgust at their lack of progress on returning. Emily and Kathy explained the facts to the newbies, but they objected to Kathy's claims. "There must have been murders," one summed up. "Otherwise there couldn't be a haunting."

The interior weather felt like thunder. Emily coughed, and ached, and quivered, noticing Kathy correcting her matches.

Lunchtime arrived at last. "Where are you going?" demanded Rebecca, when she and Kathy got onto the down elevator instead of waiting for the up.

"We brought sandwiches," Kathy explained. "It's nicer outside."

"Where are you going to sit?"

"On those benches beside the building," said Emily, thinking: Not that it's any of your business.

Rebecca held the elevator door. "It's against bank policy for people to sit there. It looks bad."

"I'd think the bank'd be happy not to have more people in that cafeteria," said Kathy.

Rebecca sighed in an extremity of exasperation. "I have had it up to here with you. First you act like you're doing us a favor to show up, and now you're breaking rules and talking back."

Kathy took a deep breath, about to say something that would end her temping days at this bank. Emily couldn't stand the thought of being alone with the newbies and Rebecca. She stepped out of the elevator. "Never mind," she said. "It doesn't matter."

Rebecca sat with the temps at lunch, stifling conversation. Workmen came and went with grim faces. Brown stains marred the carpet. The screaming down the hall was not quite drowned out by the sound of power tools and the shouting of women on cell phones, with their hands over their free ears.

Emily knew she should feel sorry for the staff, but she couldn't. What business have they got tolerating conditions like this? Someone should have sued. Jim could have gotten a bundle in compensation for anyone here. Right: for anyone who understood her rights as an employee; who had the security to deal with the covert punishments corporations deal out to people with legitimate complaints; who knew how to pick a lawyer.

The second-floor restrooms were so crowded that the group returned to the vault late, and Rebecca griped. "Sorry, ma'am," said Emily, forcing a smile. "We can only tinkle so fast."

"I guess I should expect you to be as slow at that as at everything else."

Emily threw and Kathy caught, doing three-quarters of a tray for every one done by the fastest set of newbies. Emily breathed raggedly with the effort, polling her body for evidence of worse. What if she had a stroke here? Would her soul be stuck in the vault forever if she died?

Rebecca stood behind Emily's chair. "Can't you throw any faster than that?"

"No, ma'am," said Emily.

"Why are you picking on her?" Kathy asked. "You're lucky she showed up for this job."

"Temps," sneered Rebecca. "A bunch of incompetents who couldn't get a real job if you tried!"

Emily matched cards, hands trembling with the effort of not slapping her.

"You don't know anything about temps," said Kathy. "Or staff, for that matter. No one in this bank does. If you—"

"Oh, now you're a management expert, are you? You've never been a supervisor, but you know how it's done."

"I know how it shouldn't be done," declared Kathy.

A red drop fell onto the envelopes in the half-full tray. The newbies scooted back with small cries. Every face but Rebecca's turned up. A new drop formed on the solid steel of the ceiling. A coppery smell filled the air.

Rebecca slapped the table. "That's it!" she shouted. "I've had enough! You two get your time cards, and get out."

"That's not fair. It's not their fault the ceiling's bleeding," protested the youngest newbie; young enough to think "fair" was a word of power. A second drop fell. Emily, watching the ceiling, saw the third drop form.

"Shut up! And you two—if you think I'm giving a good report to your agency, you've got another think coming!"

All of the temps fished out their time cards. "Not you," snapped Rebecca to the newbies, as the third drop fell. "You're still working here."

Blood pattered down like a sunshower. "No, we're not," squeaked the oldest.

Rebecca signed each card and unlocked the grille. "You'll never get another assignment after I'm done talking to your agency," she hissed as they left.

The youngest newbie looked apprehensive. Kathy said: "Don't worry. We'll all go to the temp office and tell our side of the story. Nobody can work under these conditions."

"And the worst is yet to come," Emily said around the tightness in her chest as they walked toward the elevators. The staff watched, standing up to see over the cubicles. "I heard that the murderer used to set fires before she started killing people. In supervisors' wastebaskets, or the conference rooms."

The first smoke alarm sounded as they reached the exit. ❧

The world is full
of tricksters waiting
to prey on the innocent.
The problem is
telling one from
the other.

Daughter of Bótù

Buddha teaches that this existence is one of suffering. And of all the Middle Kingdom, my people, the Clan of Bótù, bear the greatest burden of suffering. We are fodder for all—tiger and owl, fox and man—and only those with fleet limbs, strong hearts, and good fortune survive.

But Buddha also teaches that it is desire which causes suffering, and if we follow the Eightfold Path, we will know enlightenment and immortality, and our suffering will end. Thus, my people look to Bótù, the immortal Jade Rabbit, to hearten us with his example, and we pray to his moon shadow for strength.

This I meditated upon as I nibbled my sparse meal of centipede grass. My mouth complained that the fibrous stalks were tasteless and parched, but I ignored it and advised my grumbling belly to rejoice, for it was fortunate to have even this. My admonishments failed to persuade my belly, especially when I did not consume every last blade, but at least its protestations lessened. I gathered the final stalks together and carried them away.

Beneath the earth, in the echoing corridors of our *louju*, Mama crouched in the den we shared. She was still beautiful—the graceful arch of her paws, her long ears a study in elegance, and the perfect moon-roundness of her face—though grief and hunger had dried her coat to a brittle mat. Eyes closed, she might have been asleep but for the flicker of her nose.

BY EUGIE FOSTER | ILLUSTRATION BY JADA FITCH

"Mama, I brought you some centipede grass. I can't recommend its taste, but it's an improvement upon nothing."

Her whiskers trembled, but otherwise, it was as though I wasn't there. I crept to her side, offering what warmth and comfort I could.

"Won't you try some, Mama? It's better than the sedge grass we had two nights ago."

Nai-nai stood at the den's entrance. "Aiyah. All you could find was centipede grass, An-ying?" I hadn't heard her behind me, but Nai-nai had an uncanny aptitude for treading silently; it was probably why she'd lived so long.

"I'm afraid so," I replied, "And not very much of it, for all the distance I foraged to find it. Has Mama not stirred since I left?"

Nai-nai's ragged ears drooped, and she shook her head. She came over to sniff the centipede grass. "Have a mouthful," she coaxed, nudging Mama with her nose. Mama's soft ears flicked at Nai-nai's words, but she made no move to sample the grass.

Nai-nai and I exchanged worried nose touches.

"An-ying, come with me," she said. "I think a little bark has grown on the willow tree by the ravine."

Obediently, I lollopped after her, although I knew we had already gnawed the willow bare.

An eeriness followed Nai-nai through our forsaken *louju,* with her paws soundless as nightfall. Like chasing a spirit guide in the underworld. Once, these tunnels had abounded with the prosperous bustle of my tribe. But a spate of bad fortune—an epidemic of the panting disease, a murderous band of foxes, and this endless drought—had sent many upon the path to their next lives. Those who remained had pronounced this *louju* cursed and abandoned it, seeking better fortune elsewhere.

I'd stayed because Mama would not leave. And Nai-nai was too old to travel, so she said. Three *cí* rabbits of the clan, sharing a *louju* with death.

When we reached the south entrance, Nai-nai stopped.

"An-ying, there is great passion in you," she said. "A blessing and a curse, I have always maintained that you were born in both the year and the hour of the rabbit but also beneath the auspice of fire. Fire rabbits are impetuous and brash."

"But I—"

She bumped me with her shoulder. "Outspoken and discourteous, too."

"I'm sorry, Nai-nai." I lowered my head and flattened my ears in a conciliatory manner.

She nibbled my fur. "I'm not angry, granddaughter, but you should know we feared for you, your mother and I. Even your coat is marked by fire, and it is well known that fire rabbits die young."

I glanced at the plume of red-gold fur that blossomed across my side like a tongue of fire.

"It is why I named you 'An,' to balance the fire with calmness. But your mother—" Nai-nai twitched a whisker in annoyance. "—aiyah, water rabbits are such romantics, your mother insisted your name reflect her wishes for you, and so she named you 'ying,' beauty. And you have at least fulfilled that aspect of your name."

I snuffled modestly.

"But now, it is neither tranquility nor beauty which you must draw to you, but fire. A water rabbit will not withstand this drought, and even an old earth rabbit like your Nai-nai will wither before much longer. Then what will you do? A young *cí* by yourself with no *xióng* to marry, no one to help you raise kits. And what if the rains never come? It's only luck that has kept us from starvation until now. Even fire, eventually, runs out of fuel to burn."

"What are you saying?"

"I have consulted your horoscope, An-ying, and your destiny is clear. You must leave the *louju*. Your mother and I are no longer young, and our departure from this realm is of no great consequence. But you—"

I shivered. Abandon my home and desert my family? "I can't leave Mama and you to die."

"There is no other way. It is your destiny."

"Destiny or no, I will find a way to save you." I pushed past her and bolted into the purple blanket of night. I ran, not caring where my paws took me, until my breath tore my throat and my heart was a frenzied dance.

Panting, I slowed to a lope and stopped. I stood upon the crest of an arid hill. The sparse grass and shrubs dotting the slope were scorched husks, desolate and inedible. Overhead, the moon was a fat, silver boat floating serenely upon a black river.

I raised my nose to the sky and contemplated Bótù's silhouette. "O honorable and glorious Immortal Rabbit, I know I have often strayed from the Eightfold Path, but my intentions have always been good. Please, I must believe that there is another destiny for me than to forsake Mama and Nai-nai to starvation. But I'm only a humble cí, and I despair that I'm too ignorant to perceive it. You teach us that the path to enlightenment is sacrifice, so I give myself to your will. Tell me to throw myself to a tiger or offer myself to a hawk, and I will do it, if only it will bring the rain. Venerable Bótù, I beg you, hear your daughter's prayer."

When I finished, the moon turned away from me. I trembled. Had I been too bold? Had I offended the Jade Rabbit?

The sky grumbled, and I realized why the moon had darkened. Storm clouds unfurled in a widening veil across the sky, obscuring the white face. Rejoicing, I pricked my ears, hoping for another rumble of thunder.

Instead, I heard something else—the beat-beat of danger, the drumbeat of strong hind legs on the Earth's parched back. Who struck it? It didn't matter. Both warning and command, it goaded my heart. Match me, beat-beat, match me. Run!

I ran.

All else fell from me—hunger, grief, hope—and my mind emptied, for to corrupt the heart with fear is death when the earth-drum fills it. I became flying hind legs, the breath of night through my fur, and my surging heart.

The sky fractured in a deafening crash; water poured down. And there was chaos.

I burst upon a nightmare scene of fearsome monsters and splintered shadows. The stink of predator, fox-wolf-tiger, assailed my nose. A demon limned in lightning turned its long face to me. Four pillars slammed down, miraculously missing me. Violence rang in my ears; sounds distorted by the rain.

I threw myself across their path, straining to outrace the wind. I did not feel teeth in my back, claws tearing my side. I was not relieved or thankful, too single-minded for such luxuries. I ran.

I leaped for the sanctuary of dry hedge and prickly bush. Concealment exacted a toll of rent fur, a price I paid willingly.

I sped to the familiar landscape of our *louju* and skittered to a stop. Three massive juniper trees had sprung, full-grown, atop the mounded earth which should have been our roof. They leaned, one upon another, their entwined arms a sweeping vault overhead. A human dwelling nestled between them, its rigid walls flowing like water from trunk to trunk. How could it, they, be here? And where were Mama and Nai-nai?

The panic I'd left behind, that I had outrun, caught me. My heart, filled with earth-drum and now terror, failed.

I had time to wonder whether Mama and Nai-nai had escaped before the tree roots had crushed our *louju*. Then I had no more thoughts.

"Aiyah, you will be soaked through! An-ying, come in out of the rain."

I stirred, disoriented. "Nai-nai, did you and Mama make it outside?"

"Foolish girl, it is not we who must go outside, but you who must come in. Get up. Or must I drag my old bones into the rain to fetch you?"

I opened my eyes, and another shock struck my heart. Nai-nai had become a—a human! She stood in the doorway of the dwelling,

scowling, arms crossed. Her body was swathed in yellow and saffron silk that shimmered like sunlight skipping over a pond. A sash wrapped her waist, embroidered with flowers and dates. Her face was naked brownness, clad with creases instead of fur. But despite the strange form she wore, I knew it was Nai-nai.

She raised her arm to beckon me, as comfortable in her new shape as she'd been in her old.

I scrambled up, amazed to find myself also wearing a human body. My arms were weighted by silk the color of dawn, so at first I could not find my paws. Or hands, rather. A billow of vermillion tangled my legs, fastened by a red-gold sash that dangled to the ground. A tightness about my head was an elaborate arrangement of ridiculously lengthy fur bristling with what felt like rocks and sticks—which succeeded, briefly, in distracting me from the travesty my lovely ears had become. They were stumps! Tiny and useless, I couldn't even twitch them. And the final wonder, human speech, with all its unrabbity terms and notions, filled my head.

Unlike Nai-nai, I was ill at ease. In the handful of steps to the door I stumbled twice, entangled in folds of silk. Finally, Nai-nai hobbled out, complaining of the rain. Although in truth, the juniper canopy protected us from all but the most determined raindrops.

"I'm a human, Nai-nai," I wailed.

"Yes, I know," she said, utterly matter-of-fact.

"So are you!"

She half-dragged, half-led me inside. "And before you amaze me with another revelation, your mother is as well."

"But, how?"

Nai-nai closed the door behind us. "We are Daughters of Bótù," she said, as though that explained everything. At my uncomprehending look, she scowled, "We three are directly descended from the Jade Rabbit. It is a legacy that prompts the cosmos to favor us with human forms. I think it no favor at all, but a bother. Humankind is wicked and corrupt, and I have little use for this shape. However, destiny is destiny. No one ever consults me about it."

Inside, the house was simple but elegant, with a cozy sitting room containing furnishings of carved rosewood and teak. A straw mat cushioned the floor, and decorated screens concealed corridors and windows. Quite sizable, like our *louju,* it was meant for more than three.

Mama looked up from where she reclined on a low chair by a crackling fire. She wore a garment that wrapped her arms in the paleness before a storm and her legs in the deep indigo of twilight in summer. Her hair was piled upon her head like a cloud. Blue agate combs dangled with ornaments depicting the three phases of the moon: slender crescent, full face, and waning gibbous.

She was as beautiful a human as she had been a rabbit. I moved toward her and tripped over my hem.

"I can't walk in this," I exclaimed, kicking and floundering on the floor in a welter of silk. "And I can't balance on these stubby feet. They're so tiny! Why aren't humans constantly toppling over?"

"Aiyah, I'm too old for this." Nai-nai pulled an oval fan from her sash and waved it. "Stop thinking of your *ruqun,* your garment, as separate from yourself. Why are you not always bumbling over your trailing ears or sent sprawling by your large rabbit feet?"

"Because they are me," I retorted, "and only newborn kits cannot get their bodies aligned with their wills."

"Well, kit, your *ruqun* is as much you as your pelt was. When we transformed, all that we were became as we now are. So stop thinking of your body and garments as something to vie against."

Dubious, I did as Nai-nai advised and ceased trying to guide leg and arm, but merely thought "stand" and "walk." To my surprise, I managed to cross the room without losing my balance or becoming snarled in my skirt.

I kneeled by Mama. "Mama, how are you?"

Her eyes passed over me, and she turned to the fire.

I sagged, disappointed. What good was a new shape if every wound upon our souls remained? My broodings were interrupted by thumpings at the door.

"Hello, you inside!" The voice was a man's, crackling with worry. "My master is hurt, and we are lost. I beg you, give us shelter from the rain."

"Must destiny always knock so loudly?" Nai-nai shuffled to the door.

Trailing after, I peeked from behind her.

Outside, a slender young man garbed in a torn tunic of white hemp bowed low. "Honored grandmother," he said. "I am Guan Shi, humble companion and guard to the illustrious Bei Huangong." He indicated the man leaning heavily upon our doorframe. Bei Huangong had a ragged band of cloth knotted around his head. His face was pale over the ginger of his cross-collar shirt and damson overcoat. A growing splotch of wetness darkened the bandage.

With a start, I recognized them. They were the monsters that had so frightened me earlier as I blundered into their midst. Not demons, but only a hunting party and their horses.

"Well, don't just stand dripping on our threshold," Nai-nai said, unimpressed by the formal introduction. "Come in. We don't have a stable, but you may tie your mounts to the trees."

Guan Shi bowed again until I thought he must be kin to a squirrel, forever bobbing its head about. "We are honored by your generous hospitality."

With Guan Shi's assistance, Bei Huangong drooped gratefully to our couch.

"An-ying, heat some water," Nai-nai commanded. "And fetch my white pouch."

It was like remembering a dream. I knew what to do, although I did not know how I could. I lifted the iron pot from its hook and set it over the flames. Then I hurried to Nai-nai's den, demarked by a yellow screen with a prancing *qilin* painted upon it. Her pouch, a lumpy bag large enough to contain a piglet, lay beside her bed. Touching it gave me a momentary shock, rabbit fur without the rabbit.

I hastened to bring it to her, and Nai-nai dumped medicines and ointments from its depths.

"Let us see how destiny has treated you," she said and began unwrapping the bandage from Bei Huangong's temple.

"What happened?" I asked Guan Shi.

He bowed, and I had the urge to push him back upright. "A miracle, most certainly, honorable lady. My master was pursuing a demon hind, although we didn't know it was a demon at the time. We rode so far and fast after her, we lost our way. The rainstorm broke, half-blinding us, as she bounded over a thicket wall. My master spurred his horse to follow, but then a crimson rabbit sprang out, as though conjured from the air, and flung itself across my master's path."

I gasped, for of course, I recognized myself. Although, admittedly, "crimson" seemed a bit overstated.

"My master's horse reared," Guan Shi's continued, "throwing him, and he cracked his head on a tree. I cursed the rabbit then, what a fool I was. It had saved his life! You see, I happened to glance over

"We found **my brother on our** doorstep, ringed by **fox prints, his throat** ripped out. The fox did **it for sport, you see,** not hunger."

the thicket my master had been preparing to leap. It opened upon tragedy, a drop-off lined with jagged rocks at the bottom. No man could have survived such a fall. Of the hind, there was no sign. A thousand blessings upon that rabbit. Surely it was a good spirit."

"A spirit?" Nai-nai snorted. "More likely a frightened rabbit scampering willy-nilly about."

A faint voice joined our discussion. "I do not possess your bounty of wisdom, grandmother, but I'm certain it was a spirit." Despite Bei Huangong's weakness, his voice carried authority, the assurance of one accustomed to obedience.

"I suppose it told you that after you knocked your head?" Nai-nai asked.

He chuckled. "No, but it would've been worth the bump if it had. After my fall, I was too dizzy to ride, and we were utterly lost. But the rabbit spirit saved us again. It marked the direction we should take with its own red fur and guided us to the tendril of smoke from your fire."

"It did, did it?" Nai-nai pinioned me with an arch glare. "How fortunate indeed." She administered a damp plaster to Bei Huangong's head. "The cut isn't deep, but the fall has rattled your skull. You'll wait several days to ride or travel if you care what's good for you. Also, you mustn't sleep tonight, or you might not wake tomorrow. Best if someone keeps you company."

"I'll gladly stay up with my master," Guan Shi said.

Nai-nai eyed him. "You are swaying on your feet. You would doze off within the hour."

"I wouldn't—"

"No, you rest in there." She nodded at a screen painted with cranes.

Bei Huangong waved his hand, silencing any further protest, although lines furrowed the space between Guan Shi's eyes.

"Don't fret," Nai-nai said. "I'll brew some medicine, and An-ying will make sure your lord doesn't drowse."

Bei Huangong smiled at me. "I'm surely blessed by the spirits. They save my life, guide us here, and now I am to have a beautiful nurse to converse with for the whole night."

I lowered my eyes, suddenly shy. I hadn't thought to become accustomed to human faces so easily. But the smoothness of Bei Huangong's brow, the way his mouth quirked when he spoke, I found these natural, appealing even, not caring that he had no fur or such tiny ears.

Nai-nai snorted. "An-ying, if your eyelids start to droop, you'll give that Guan Shi a shake and get him up, yes?"

"Yes, Nai-nai."

She sprinkled some herbs in the iron pot. "Let that steep. Give him a cup when the water is the same color as spring moss, and another two swallows every half hour." She waved her finger at him. "You drink it all, you hear?"

"Yes, grandmother." Bei Huangong inclined his head, but then winced. "I would swallow mud if it relieved this troublesome hammering."

"Good. Now, my bones are old, and this night has been long. I'm off to sleep." She shuffled away to the yellow-screened room, shooing Guan Shi before her.

Still bashful, I poured a cup of the moss-green tea for Bei Huangong.

He grimaced at the taste. "Why must medicine always be bitter?"

"I suppose to encourage us to take greater care so we will not require it."

"Now that's a sensible answer. Much better than the ramblings of my physicians."

My face grew warm, and my breath quickened as though I bounded full speed down a hill.

"Why, I believe your grandmother's brew has quelled the hammering. So, what shall we talk about?" He beckoned to Mama in her chair by the fire. "I don't mean to exclude you, madame. Shall we all play a word game?"

Mama shook her head. She rose and drifted to a rain-colored screen with a black tortoise swimming across it. With a fluid bow, she disappeared behind it.

"I didn't mean to offend," Bei Huangong said.

"It wasn't you. Mama doesn't talk. Ever since a fox stole my baby brother, she hasn't spoken."

"A fox?"

"We found my brother on our doorstep, ringed by fox prints, his throat ripped out. The fox did it for sport, you see, not hunger. Nai-nai says Mama's voice followed my brother's soul to the underworld of Huang-chan so that she may comfort him with lullabies. I think a portion of her soul followed him too."

Bei Huangong's eyes darkened. "How terrible. Double tragedy to lose a family member to a fox and also one so young. And you three ladies live alone? Where's your father?"

"He became ill and died not long after the fox took my brother."

"So much tragedy for one so lovely."

"Buddha teaches that this existence is one of suffering." I studied my white hands with their peculiar and useful side digit. "I try to rejoice that my loved ones suffer no more."

"My priests would applaud your devout and philosophic outlook."

I tried to smile, but couldn't. "Don't be deceived. I'm a poor philosopher. Truthfully, I cannot stop myself from missing them."

"It's natural to grieve. I, too, have experienced a loss." He covered my hand with his. "Sometimes, there is no solace to be found."

Where his hand touched mine, I prickled with awareness, sensitive to his radiant warmth, the thrill of skin on skin, the cool caress of silk. Was this why humans covered themselves, because lacking fur, they were susceptible to such distracting and delicious sensations?

"Who-who do you grieve for?" I asked.

"My father died last year. A hunting accident."

He sighed and slipped his hand away, and I regretted my question. "My stepmother blames me that I wasn't the one leading the hunt that day. In a fashion, it's because of her I was out this night. Our food stores have dwindled from this drought, and she lamented to me that the remaining meat in our larder was gamy. I hoped that an offering of fresh venison would soften her, a little, maybe. You can imagine how overjoyed I was to glimpse that hind and how eager I was to acquire her. But it was only the mockery of demons." He touched the poultice on his head. "I admit, I'm a poor philosopher, too. There are times when I wish it had been me instead of my father on that terrible hunt. I despair that I'll never be the lord he was."

"Don't say such things." I took Bei Huangong's hand back and laced my fingers through his. "Nai-nai says that each of us has a destiny, one that cannot be escaped, and to rail at destiny is the province of madmen and fools."

He regarded my hand with surprise, although he didn't pull away. Had I behaved inappropriately? But surely, he had done it first.

"Lady An-ying, I had not properly considered our situation before. Perhaps you would prefer that Guan Shi sleep on the floor out here by the fire?"

We were fire meeting fire, and **it seemed nothing** could extinguish our **fervor, not even** the incessant **rains.**

"What? Why would I want that? The poor thing would wake with a terrible bend in his neck."

"Otherwise, we have no chaperone to safeguard your honor."

I laughed. "Are you saying I should fear for my honor with you?"

His eyes sparkled. "As lovely as you are, I think I can manage to maintain a proper decorum. It's your reputation I am considering. Are you not concerned about flapping tongues?"

"Who is there to gossip to out here? The insects and birds care little about our doings."

"I see. So—" He pulled me closer until I could feel his breath on my face. "If I were to, say, steal a kiss, there would be no harm?"

I could have broken free. Not only because he was hurt and weak, but also, there was no coercion in his touch. To keep me there required my consent.

"There's no need to steal something freely given." I closed the space between us.

Bei Huangong tasted of heat and smoke, strong wind and salt. The fire in me approved, and I wanted the kiss to never stop. It was Bei Huangong who broke from it, wincing.

"Forgive me, but that irksome hammering has resumed."

"Oh, I forgot your medicine!" I rushed off to measure two swallows of Nai-nai's tea.

I would not have slept that night even if Bótù had flown down from the moon and commanded me to. Bei Huangong taught me how to play Go using crumbled bits of charcoal from the fire and leftover scraps of Guan Shi's undershirt—the origin of the makeshift bandage—as pieces and the straw mat as a board. He told me of his palace, and I told him of the quiet peace of the forest. I worried that my prattle would bore him asleep, but he listened, rapt, to my poor efforts to describe the autumn trees at twilight, dripping gold and silver in the fading light.

Too soon, a blush of palest gold through painted screens announced the dawn, and shortly after, Nai-nai bustled in.

"Everyone still awake? Good, good."

Bei Huangong astonished me by heaving himself from the couch to kneel before her. "Grandmother, may I assume you are An-ying's guardian?"

Nai-nai frowned. "As much as she needs a guardian, I suppose."

He swayed, his face losing some of the color it had gained in the night, and Nai-nai stuck a gnarled hand out to steady him.

"You should lie down. You're still sick."

He continued, undeterred. "I'm a respected nobleman, kin to the emperor. I can provide references, if you like."

Nai-nai eyed me over Bei Huangong's head. "An-ying, what's all this about?"

I spread my hands, as baffled as she.

"Grandmother, may I have your blessing to petition An-ying's affections?" Bei Huangong blurted. "I wish to court her."

"Ah, I see." Nai-nai's mouth puckered. "I'd hoped she would take up with one of our clan, but no one cares about my opinion. Do as you like. I'm not foolish enough to meddle in her destiny, anyway."

He took this as assent, and I remained bemused at the strangeness of human ways.

How to describe our courtship? I forgot the meaning of time when I was with Bei Huangong. We were fire meeting fire, and it seemed nothing could extinguish our fervor, not even the incessant rains.

But as the moon burgeoned, so did Bei Huangong's strength. Standing no longer brought dizziness, and the hammering in his head departed for good. While I rejoiced at his health, nevertheless, every color became less vivid to me, a match to the sky's lusterless gray. A simple, pastoral life could never be the destiny of a man such as Bei Huangong. So I was prepared for heartbreak when he turned serious eyes to me as we strolled beneath dripping branches.

"An-ying, I must return home," he said.

"Yes." I didn't trust myself to say more.

"Come with me. Marry me."

With that question, color returned to my world.

Nai-nai glowered at Bei Huangong when he announced our betrothal. But it's not our way to deny love, and once I'd assured her that I wanted this more than soft fur and whiskers, the elusive perfume of earth and grass, and the ecstasy of bounding on strong rabbit legs beneath the night sky, her protests ended. Mama only gazed at me with distant eyes and kissed my cheek.

"Come with us," I begged them. "Bei Huangong says there's plenty of room—"

"No," Nai-nai said. "Your mother and I are acquainted with that world, and we don't wish to revisit it. And besides, I'm too old to travel."

"But how can I leave you?"

"Do not worry for us. Now that the rains have come, we'll be fine. I told you it was your destiny to leave us, didn't I?"

"Oh, Nai-nai—" The lines of her face blurred in an overflow of tears.

"Enough of that. Here." She pressed two items into my hands. One was a round mirror of white jade, the full moon framing the silvered glass. Three rabbits of inlaid mother-of-pearl adorned the back, their leaping bodies forming an everlasting circle. The other was a little sickle knife, the hilt a jade rabbit with ears streaming down its back. "There is great virtue in these talismans. They will remind you of who you are and who you are descended from."

When I looked into the mirror, reflected back was not the maiden An-ying, but the rabbit An-ying with whiskers and pink nose. But rabbit me wore dawn-colored silk, and a copper bird and a sprig of paper apricot blossoms—my hair ornaments—stuck out behind my long ears. It was a fanciful magic, unlike the more practical one which kept my *ruqun* fresh and pristine through mud and brambles.

I embraced her.

"Humph. Don't let Bei Huangong's world make you forget everything I've taught you."

Horseback riding was a new experience, one I didn't enjoy. The bouncing gait agitated my insides, and perching so high above the ground provoked a relentless apprehension. However, I did enjoy the way my lover clasped me so securely before him as we shared a saddle. And the strong legs of Bei Huangong and Guan Shi's steeds covered more terrain than I thought possible.

Bei Huangong's palace was enclosed by stone walls with round doorways and stylish, vase-shaped apertures. Brick-lined walkways meandered through a garden overflowing with climbing roses, camellias, and sweet osmanthus. Inside, the floors were a mosaic of vibrantly glazed tile, and a high, double-arched ceiling soared overhead. It was more beautiful than my most lavish imaginings.

In such idyllic surroundings, how could the flow of my destiny be anything but tranquil and harmonious? And yet, there was one eddy, Bei Huangong's stepmother.

Meng Shouzhen was an exquisite beauty, so glamorous, so elegant in her embroidered *shenyi*, her black hair glittering with jewels. The perfection of her plum-colored lips and willow leaf-shaped eyebrows overwhelmed me. And when I saw her eyes, I gaped like the ingénue I was. They were luminous, shining brighter than any of the gems in her hair, and most remarkable of all, they were golden.

"What a charming girl," she said, her voice as refined as the rest of her. "But then, I'm not that surprised. You would have to be extraordinary to have orchestrated such a prosperous match." She laughed, a scintillating ripple of sound. "You're a very fortunate girl indeed. Well, good for you. I cannot fault anyone for appreciating the finer things and wanting to better her character."

I bowed. "Th-thank you, madam. I've always striven to improve myself."

Bei Huangong stiffened as though I'd committed some grievous impropriety. But Meng Shouzhen only laughed more.

Later, I asked Bei Huangong to explain my blunder, and his lips

tightened. "Never mind. Only try to watch what you say. We're no longer in the forest, and my reputation as well as yours may be blackened by a thoughtless remark."

Distressed that my ignorance had caused him to lose face, I resolved to take greater care. But in no time at all, I bungled again. Bei Huangong surveyed me one morning, lines of displeasure crinkling his eyes.

"Must you always wear that *ruqun*?"

"Don't you like it?" I asked, astonished.

"It's fine, but you have closets brimming with rich silks and expensive brocades. Why not put on something different?"

"But I like my *ruqun*," I said. "Why do I need anything else?"

His mouth fell open then snapped shut. "Reluctant to flaunt new clothes? You are a most singular woman, An-ying. Nevertheless, while your unassuming sensibilities are laudable, people are talking. Li Fu said to me the other day, 'It's just as well your wife's so fond of that pink *ruqun*. What man's fortunes would be enough to maintain a second wardrobe the size of your stepmother's?'"

I blinked. "Who—?"

"It doesn't matter. My point is it's unbecoming for my bride to be seen so often in the same garment."

"I didn't realize. Of course I'll do as you suggest."

Initially, I pined for my *ruqun*, but it meant so much to Bei Huangong that I parade about in amber *zhaoshan* robes, peach *qun* skirts, burgundy *yi* jackets, and gauzy, sea green sashes. So I folded my *ruqun* away into a cedar chest, and after a while, the perpetual sense of having misplaced something lessened.

Our wedding was a sumptuous affair with towers of sophisticated dishes for me to sample. I regretted the disappointment in the head cook's face when I declined a serving of crackling duck as well as a slice of roast pork, but the thought of eating flesh curdled my stomach. At least his wounded expression changed to smiles when I praised his pan-fried dumplings and devoured two whole moon cakes, getting my hands sticky with sweet bean paste.

That night, Bei Huangong reverently divested me of my wedding *quju*, peeling away the heavy brocade embroidered with phoenixes as though I were a frail blossom that must be coaxed to bloom. In his arms, my qualms and uncertainties dissolved like sugar in the rain. If before we had been afire, now we rivaled the sun. For such bliss, I would withstand a hundred Meng Shouzhens, adorn myself in nettles, and learn to chirp like a cricket.

My status among Bei Huangong's people altered in small and peculiar ways. Men wouldn't exchange more than the most cursory of phrases with me, refusing to meet my eyes and grasping at the least excuse to escape my presence. Yet they scrutinized me so intently—from a safe distance—I feared I would leave a trail of calamities, such a distraction I posed. As for the women, they began to emulate me. If I wore lavender and topaz silk one day, the next it seemed I waded through a field of rustling lavender and topaz.

"It's most disconcerting," I commented to Guan Shi, as I waited for Bei Huangong to return from a meeting with some dignitaries. "Why do they do that?"

"They hope that by echoing you, some of your beauty will bounce onto them."

I giggled. "How foolish." I enjoyed Guan Shi's company. Not only because he was less a stranger, but he was perhaps the only man whose demeanor toward me hadn't changed. "Why, next to Meng Shouzhen, I'm as common and grubby as a mud-spattered stick. Why don't they imitate her?"

He bowed. "If you'll pardon my forthright words, it is inner beauty as well as outward appearance the court ladies admire. My master's stepmother possesses a fearsome beauty, but it is a splendor to quail before rather than to covet. While you are a delicate orchid, shy and winsome. Such beauty even a blind man would appreciate."

I was taken aback, both at his oblique criticism of Meng Shouzhen as well as of his appraisal of me. But Bei Huangong's arrival saved me from thinking of a response.

When he saw us, the corners of his mouth pulled down.

"What is it?" I asked. "What's the matter?"

"There's trouble to the south," he said. "Barbarian raiders. My borders are guarded by mountains and air, but less fortunate Hao Feigong wishes to drive them off before they ravage more than a few peasant villages. I am taking a garrison to join him in a concerted strike."

"You're leaving?"

"I must. Otherwise, I lose face with Hao Feigong." He raised a hand to cup my chin. "Don't look so bleak. If the rains persist, we may flood them out, and I'll be back before the osmanthus blossoms fade."

"Then I'll pray every day for rain."

The next morning, he rode away at the head of a multitude of soldiers bristling with spears and bows, taking Guan Shi with him so I had no one at all to talk to. I'm ashamed to admit that as soon as the clatter of their departure faded, I hid myself away, even taking my meals in solitude. While I didn't concur with Guan Shi's assessment of "delicate orchid," "shy" was accurate. The scrutiny of my husband's people flustered me—what I wore, what I said, how I behaved—and I did not fully understand the standards by which they judged me. Without Bei Huangong to bolster my nerve, I preferred cheerless isolation.

Lacking the impetus of agenda or husband to accommodate, I reverted from a daylight routine to the nighttime habits of a rabbit. I explored the garden by starshine, nibbling the occasional rose petal or violet with delight, meditated upon Bótù's shadow as the moon wheeled across the sky, and admired my reflection in the moon mirror. Vanity notwithstanding, the soft-furred visage in the glass comforted me, made me feel less alone.

One drizzly evening, a wondrous revelation bolstered my spirits and made the hours less weighty. I determined that the swelling of my belly was not due to an overindulgence of rich food but budding new life. Although I became even more impatient for Bei Huangong's return, my nights passed in glorious musings. What would the baby be like? Would our child possess Bei Huangong's expressive eyes? Be clever like Nai-nai? Or beautiful like Mama? And how would the child's rabbit heritage manifest?

On a rain-filled day at the end of a rain-filled week, I awakened to an excited ruckus. Banners and horses had been sighted. Bei Huangong was coming home!

I dressed in awkward haste and rushed to greet him, arriving as my husband rode through the palace gates, mud-spattered and weary, but also triumphant.

"We executed a well-devised plan with prodigious results," he declared to the cheering throng. "Lured them to a drained gorge and released the river upon them. Swept those barbarians back to hell."

When his eyes lit upon me, they filled with joy, and I sped to his side. But then they darkened, and I slowed my steps, suddenly timid. It had been a long while since I'd been among so many people.

"Welcome home, my husband." I moved to embrace him, but he raised a hand.

"I'm caked in muck and dirt from the road."

"It doesn't bother me."

"Still, perhaps you would be so gracious as to allow me time to see to my men and cleanse away the mud. I'd be obliged if you could wait for me in our chambers."

"Oh, but—"

"An-ying, please do as I ask."

Crestfallen, I took myself away. But I soon cheered up. The dictates of human society were complex and baffling. I'd undoubtedly violated some silly custom involving muddy receptions. But soon we would share in the joyous anticipation of our child's birth.

The moon had risen before I heard his footsteps. As soon as he strode in, I ran to press his hand through azure silk to my distended belly.

"Bei Huangong, isn't it wonderful?" I babbled, too jubilant for restraint. "I worried you wouldn't return before his birth. It will be a son, I'm sure of it. Feel how he leaps?"

But his reaction wasn't as I expected. He yanked his hand away.

I tried not to look as hurt as I felt. "I thought you'd be pleased."

He studied me with haggard eyes. "I've tried to disregard Meng Shouzhen's insinuations, although it was difficult when you persisted in flirting with my servant."

"Flirting? You mean with Guan Shi? We only talked—"

"But now what am I to think?" He ignored my protests. "I come back to scandalized recriminations that you secluded yourself in my absence, only emerging at night like a thief. And now this. I had to endure pointing fingers and smirks behind my back the whole day. Not the homecoming I'd visualized, I assure you."

He'd never before spoken so harshly to me. "Bei Huangong—"

"I believed your eagerness in the forest was a testament of your love, that you never protested or pushed me away, leaving it to me to curb our ardor, out of innocence and trust."

"You wanted me to push you away?"

"In reality you must have been quite desperate to ensnare me. How you must have laughed at my credulity. But now the truth is out."

"I don't understand—"

He grabbed the borders of my *shan* and yanked the blue silk taut against my body. "This child comes too early to be mine! You hid it cunningly before, or perhaps I was too smitten to notice. But you've misplayed yourself. Sequestering yourself has only drawn attention to how gravid you are."

In a rush, I understood. "Oh, Bei Huangong, I should have told you before, but I thought—I thought, oh, I don't know what I thought."

"Told me what? That you are an opportunistic, scheming seductress?"

His words struck me like blades. "No! That I am a rabbit. Until the night you came to me, I ran on four paws and ate grass and slept in a den beneath the earth. It was I who ran across your path and startled your horse. It was my fur, torn by the brambles, which led you to our fire. I-I think it's because I'm a rabbit that our son quickens with such haste. Be assured, though, he is yours."

He stared at me for several long heartbeats. "Well, that's inventive, at least. But I don't think it will mollify the people counting on their fingers. Or do you expect the baby to have two furred ears and gnaw on roots?" He thrust me away. "What fool do you take me for?"

I caught myself on the bed. "Why are you so determined to despise me?" I cried. "You condemn me without even the opportunity you allow a thief to prove his innocence. When our son is born, he will take after you and none other."

"Why wait until then?" he snapped. "Although from the look of you, I wouldn't be surprised if you dropped your brat tomorrow. I'll just ask the magistrate whether it's possible it could be mine, given that not three months have passed since the cursed day we met. It will be convenient. I'll present my question at the same time I petition him to divorce us."

"Divorce?" I gasped. "At least wait until he's born to see—"

"I suppose it would be uncivilized to dump you in the street as you are. But I'd be grateful if you took yourself to the outer courtyard. I don't want you polluting my chambers with your presence."

With those hateful words, he stormed out.

I burst into tears. Before I could compose myself or sort my thoughts, a trio of women arrived. They hefted my cedar chest and ushered it and me, still sobbing, to a mean little room with a slit for a window. Servant's quarters. For comfort, I had a single lantern and a straw mat on the floor.

I huddled on the thin mat, too stupefied to even light the lantern. The night passed in a haze of tears. Waking and sleeping were the same; I wept, eyes opened or closed, and dreamed of sorrow.

Morning arrived as jabbing fingers of sunlight through the window. My eyes were tear-crusted and hot, my face greasy with sweat, although I shivered in the dank air. I squinted, shielding my eyes with my hand, and saw I'd slept, after all. The window faced west; it was discourteous sunset that beset me, not the rudeness of dawn.

A needle of pain ran through me. Blue silk adhered to my skin as I heaved myself up and away from the noisome sun. Another pain followed the first—not a needle this time, but a nail—and I cried out.

The babe was coming, and I was alone.

In my anguish, I knew only desperation. Oh, Nai-nai, this is not how my son should arrive. You should be here to press your warm side against mine and to ease me with the birthing tales of our clan. My son should be born surrounded by the scent of soft fur and cool earth. I should have Mama's shoulder to rest my head on, her beautiful ears fluttering my whiskers like when I was a kit. Please help me, Nai-nai, Mama. I can't do this by myself.

The door swung open. Had my family miraculously heard my pleas and come? But the waning light revealed the last person I wanted or expected. Meng Shouzhen.

She spoke not one word of greeting, only crossed to the lantern and lit it. By its flame, she stood, resplendent in a scarlet *shenyi,* and scrutinized me.

Another pain lanced through me, and I folded my body tight, fighting not to scream. It was an instinctive struggle, to suffer in silence and not invite a predator's interest.

As though I summoned peril with my thoughts, I scented fox. Delirium born of pain and sickness thickened the air with the stench of terror, violence, and death. I blinked my streaming eyes and gasped. Meng Shouzhen had transformed from a beautiful woman into a slavering vixen, yellow eyes aglow and sharp teeth glistening. The fox bent over me, its panting breath hot and fetid, eager to devour the newborn kit I labored to birth.

I screamed—foolish human response—and the vision cleared. But the fox scent hung in the air.

Meng Shouzhen tugged at my *shan-qun,* loosening it and uncovering my legs. Her eyes glinted, the lantern's flame turning them molten and flat.

"You're a fox!" I blurted.

She smiled, baring pointed, white teeth. "Very true," she said. "Most perceptive of you, little rabbit."

My eyes widened.

"Oh, don't worry, your pretense is quite good. I'd never have guessed had not Bei Huangong confided in me. And you needn't look so stricken. He didn't know he was betraying you. He still has a bit of softness for you. Isn't that sweet? He begged me to tend you during your labor, and told me how he feared you might be sick in the mind." She cackled, a terrible, barking call.

I froze. I must not move, must not stir so much as a whisker, and maybe the fox would overlook me.

"Don't worry, little rabbit, my teeth aren't for your throat, although I do owe you for your bothersome rescue. I'll content myself by killing your son. Can't have a little half-rabbit heir hopping about, not when I'm so close to inheriting it all."

Pain skewered me; I only shivered. But I couldn't stop the hot

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I raised my **arms in wordless** prayer, and the silvery **light cleansed me,** washing the blood **and anguish and** grief away.

Without beginning, middle or end, of infinite power,
of infinite arms, whose eyes are the moon and sun,
I see thee, whose face is flaming fire,
Burning this whole universe with Thy radiance.

—from the Bhagavad Gita

Light of a Thousand Suns

BY JAMES VAN PELT | ILLUSTRATION BY DALE RUTTER

Sacrifice and suicide can make uncomfortable bedfellows in this rather controversial tale.

Trellis noticed the trailer parked at the edge of the Lynwood Mall's parking lot, but he didn't think much about it. He hadn't been sleeping well. Troublesome dreams he couldn't recall. In fact, the idea that maybe the trailer had been there for a couple of days tickled the back of his mind until he dismissed it in the morning's hassles. Penney's had started their big half-off sale, making traffic in the lot heavy and crowd control a nightmare, so Trellis didn't spend much time watching the monitors. First, a tiny woman who must have been at least

For a second he relived being ten, where he looked out his windows at the orange glow climbing in the sky, and the sick, lost feeling of recognizing it, too late.... a death wall filled with long teeth ready to shred him ...

ninety-five tried to muscle a thirty-two inch Radio Shack plasma screen television into her minivan and sprained her neck. Waiting for the paramedics to get there, he held her hand. "I'm not really hurt, dears," she kept insisting as they strapped her to a back board.

Then he spent a half hour helping two high school boys change a flat. After that, a woman so overweight the backs of her arms shifted from side to side when she walked stuffed four hundred dollars worth of stretch slacks and extra-extra large blouses into a baby carriage before strolling out of Foley's. He knew she was a shoplifter the second she came into view of the south exit camera. The bad ones kept their heads down and tried not to look like they were in a hurry. He sprinted to the exit and confronted her before she left the sidewalk. Of course, she swore she knew nothing about the clothes until he started pulling out one item after another.

"They're for my baby girl," she mumbled over and over as Trellis sat beside her as the policeman processed her for arrest. Trellis felt sad. "This isn't the end of the world. You'll grow from this." Catching shoplifters bothered him. He liked it better when he could give tokens to a forlorn five-year-old wandering in the arcade where his mom put him while she shopped. He liked to jiggle the tokens in his pocket when he walked knowing he would give them away later. Trellis liked watching people buy gifts, and he liked families smiling as they talked to each other, packages in hand.

Trellis didn't look at the trailer again until night had fallen and the mall closed. An old Airstream, a beat up-silver bar of soap on wheels, sat at the parking lot's edge, hitched to an even older red pickup with busted running boards. A lone figure walked into the streetlight's illumination, knocked on the door, then disappeared within.

After finishing his rounds, making sure the gates pulled down in front of the stores were latched and the kiosks covered, he checked the parking lot monitors for the last time. No movement from the trailer and no lights within. He signed out for the evening before handing his keys to the night man, a retired car salesman with an extensive collection of dirty jokes.

"How'd it go today?" A long mustard stain marked the night guy's left sleeve.

"Another day, another dollar."

"Ain't it the truth?" The night guy settled into the office chair in front of the monitors. Dim lights showed empty halls, the central fountain no longer spouting, quiet loading docks, and a half dozen views of the parking lot. A sheet of wind-pushed newspaper slid across one screen. "How long you going to keep working both day shifts?"

Trellis shrugged. "Until they get somebody new. I don't mind. Sleep's overrated anyway. I get bad dreams sometimes." He winked. "I'll check that trailer on the way out," he said, looking toward the image.

The hallways smelled of linoleum polish and warm chocolate. Trellis twirled his car keys on one finger as he left the building and walked to his car.

It wasn't until he was ready to pull out of the mall that he noticed the trailer parked by the exit, and he remembered that he said he would check it. He thought it was funny he'd almost forgotten.

Peeling bumper stickers decorated the trailer's back: FRODO FAILED! THE GOVERNMENT HAS THE RING, and FIGHTING FOR PEACE IS LIKE F***ING FOR CHASTITY. He chuckled at the last one. It struck him as cute when people substituted asterisks for a curse word, as if that made one not think of the word. A decal of a mushroom cloud under a red circle and slash covered one of the dark rear windows.

As he turned onto the street, still laughing, he realized that he hadn't actually gotten out of his car to check the trailer. *Isn't that odd?* he thought.

At home he watched Fox News for an hour. Tucked between a story about a celebrity scandal, and another chronicling which starlets were pregnant, was a brief piece about a pair of Middle Eastern countries with atomic ambitions. The commentator pointed out that forty-four countries operated nuclear power plants, all capable of producing weapons-grade nuclear material. What did a couple more or less matter?

That night, the dream Trellis remembered was of F***ING FOR CHASTITY while a television in the background moaned out an emergency signal. "Seek shelter now," a voice called out. SEEK ... SHELTER ... NOW. Trellis slid around in his dream bed, never quite able to hold the starlet, and he couldn't tell if what he heard close by was his breathing or the shrill call of air raid sirens, and all the time a light so bright he couldn't close his eyes against it burned in the room. In the dream, the flare beat into his head, and his heart flapped like wings against his ribs. How can I catch her under the light of a thousand suns?

It was a most unsatisfying erotic dream.

Trellis found the night guy filling out his records in the security room. The dawn's golden gleam caught the top of the silver trailer. *Wonder how long that's been there?* Trellis thought before remembering he'd seen the Airstream the night before. He checked his watch: 6:30. On the interior monitors, the morning cleaning crews worked the mall floors and buffed the display windows, readying for the 9:00 start of business. A motorized flatbed dolly, loaded with boxes for restocking, moved from store to store, but Trellis, munching his morning donut, concentrated on the trailer where three people stood in line at the door. It opened, letting one in, and the two remaining stood with their arms crossed against the morning cold. Another person coming from the bus stop walked the length of the parking lot, vanishing at the edge of one screen to appear at the edge of the next. He joined the two. They nodded to each other the way strangers do.

"People can't camp out at the mall. Did you call the cops on that trailer?" Trellis asked the night guy.

"What trailer?"

"West parking lot, next to the highway."

The night guy put his flashlight in his locker. He looked puzzled. "I thought about it. I'm pretty sure I did."

"Call it in?"

"No, think about it. Are you positive it was here earlier?"

"Yeah, all day yesterday."

"If it's still parked at closing, we can report it." Then he told Trellis a ten-minute-long joke about a skinny blonde, her fat boyfriend, and a wheelbarrow filled with wet cement.

Trellis glanced at the monitor before heading on his rounds. "Did you notice that trailer?" A strong sense of déjà vu swept over him.

"What trailer?"

While Trellis tested his walkie-talkie's batteries and read the morning's routine, thoughts about the trailer flitted away.

Later, when Trellis stopped at Pretzel Palace for a midmorning snack, he found himself thinking about a mushroom cloud under a red circle and slash. He finished the pretzel before rushing back to the video surveillance room. No cars were parked next to the trailer, but four people stood outside the door. He headed for the west exit, keeping the trailer's slippery image in his head, pretty sure that if he stopped thinking about it for a moment, it would squirt off like a minnow.

Acetone smells from the nail salon distracted him, but he ignored them long enough to make it to the doors, and by then he could see the silver shape at the parking lot's edge.

"What are you folks doing out here?" Trellis asked as he approached.

"Waiting our turn," said a house-wifey woman in a tie-die blouse and fringed jeans first in line. Sleep circles so dark that she might as well have a pair of black eyes marked her complexion.

Without a tinge of irony, the man behind her said, "Saving humanity." He wore an "I Served" Marine Corps patch on a flight jacket. His face too was haggard.

Behind them, beyond the sidewalk, traffic zipped by, thirty minutes short of rush hour.

"Do you mind if I go in?" he asked. The people in line creeped him out. Their postures were odd, a strained mix of nervousness and resignation. He imagined inmates on death row if they had to form a line for executions.

"No rush," said Marine Corps patch.

Trellis knocked on the door. The woman who answered stepped onto the metal stair protruding from the trailer's side. A piece of black yarn tied her gray hair into a ponytail. She blinked against the sunlight. "We're going as fast as we can," she said.

"Um, sorry. I'm not with them. Mall security."

"Oh." She turned to the inside. "Mall security."

"Invite him in."

A powerful wave of incense surrounded Trellis as he mounted the stair, and it took a second for his eyes to adjust. A woman who could have been the twin to the one at the door sat at a short and narrow table on the opposite side of the trailer. Beyond her, a small sink, a spice rack, and a drainer holding three plates and three cups were tucked under the cabinets. A curtain hung from ceiling to floor and wall to wall, hiding the rest. The ceiling pressed close enough to Trellis's head that he had to duck. No one else was in the trailer that he could see.

"Sorry to bother you ladies. It's just that you have been in the parking lot for a while, and it doesn't look like you're shopping." He sat on a chair bolted to the wall next to the door.

The lady who had let him in sat next to the other. If they weren't twins, they had to be sisters. "No, we're not."

"We're not doing anything illegal," said the other. She looked at her sister, "At least nothing immoral."

"I didn't say you were." Trellis said. "But what are you doing?"

A man wearing a hooded sweatshirt, the hood up over his head, pushed aside the curtain. In one hand he held a fat white candle, in the other, a long black-bladed knife. "What's the holdup? We're on a schedule."

"Mall security," said the woman next to the curtain.

The man in the sweatshirt glowered at Trellis. "Send the next one in." He closed the curtain with an impatient tug.

The woman closest to Trellis rose. "Excuse me." She squeezed past him and opened the door. "Next."

The tie-died housewife shuddered. "Okay." Trellis caught a glimpse of the man behind her before she climbed the stair. He put his hand on her shoulder. "God bless you," he said.

"He will." She stood just inside as if afraid of fully entering.

"How did you find us?" asked the pony-tailed women next to the curtain.

The tie-died woman rubbed her eyes. "I Googled 'ban the bomb' and followed the links. It was a lot of links."

"We get many that way. It's not too late to go back. You can still change your mind."

The woman closed her eyes tight before taking a ragged breath. "No, this is the right time. It's a good time in my life."

Trellis looked at the three of them, a strange tableau of women talking without making sense. Also, the hooded figure with a knife unnerved him. Trellis put his hand on his walkie-talkie, but wasn't sure that a better strategy would be to bolt for the door. None of them were paying attention to him. He'd never listened to a conversation that felt so charged with subtext.

"You know it works?" said the tie-died woman "It absolutely works?"

"Yes," said both of the other women.

"I'm in." She took a deep breath, let it out, and then breathed again before walking to the curtain and through. The pony-tailed woman closest to the curtain followed her.

"What in the hell is going on here?" said Trellis, perched on the edge of his seat. His voice raised an octave by the end of the question, and his pulse drummed.

The woman eyed him impassively. Finally, she said, "This isn't a good way to start. We haven't been introduced yet. My name is Jennifer." She put out her hand.

Trellis took her fingers in his own. She had a firm and pleasant handshake. "My sister's name is Chastity."

"Trellis," he said, then flinched, recalling his dream. "Chastity?"

"My parents named the younger children after the virtues. My other sisters are Hope and Patience." She paused as if thinking over the practice of naming children. "How old are you?"

"Fifty-four," he said without thinking. How much space was in the trailer beyond the curtain? By his figuring, there could hardly be room for three people on the other side. Whatever they were doing in there, they weren't making any sounds.

"Do you remember nuclear fire drills?" She rested an elbow on the table and the side of her face in her hand.

"What does this have to do with you and whatever you and those people outside are doing?" His chest constricted, as if his skin had shrunk a couple of sizes, compressing his lungs.

"I do," she said. "I remember 'duck and cover.' I remember radiation shelters in the basements of public buildings. You're old enough. Do you remember too?"

She sounded so reasonable and matter of fact. Trellis concentrated on slowing his breathing. For a second he thought he'd just felt coronary twinges, his fate from eating most of his meals in Café Court for the last fifteen years, rotating from one fast food outlet to the next. He was on his feet all day, but he'd noticed the bulge of belly that hung over his belt more and more lately, and his mantra, "I'm big boned," carried less conviction each time he said it. Yes, maybe it was a coronary.

Not that a heart attack was any more comforting than being in a trailer talking to two strange women and a man with a knife.

Trellis felt as if the mall were a thousand miles away, that the trailer existed in an alien landscape. He returned to a familiar script, but it sounded ridiculous to say it. "Ma'am, you can't sit a trailer in a public parking lot overnight. There's zoning to consider."

"Do you want to know why we're here?"

"Sure." His head swam a little. The incense was strong, even stronger than he'd first thought. He could taste it, an exotic flower coating the back of his throat. "Can I have a glass of water?"

Jennifer filled a cup she took from the drainer. He sipped it gratefully.

"It's about the bombs," she said. "It's about duck and cover, and confronting the sword of Damocles."

"I'm sorry?"

She leaned toward him, her hands clasped now, elbows on her knees. "Don't you remember? Didn't you have nuclear nightmares?"

For a second he relived being ten (or was it last week?), where he looked out his windows at the orange glow climbing in the sky, and the sick, lost feeling of recognizing it, too late. Rushing toward him, like in those Civil Defense films, a death wall filled with long glass

teeth ready to shred him in an incinerator of instant motion. And he couldn't move, not in the dream. It was always too late. He remembered hiding beneath his desk in third grade like all the other kids, rumps poking out of one side and hands-covered heads poking out the other. Even at the time he thought that his desk would be poor shelter if the roof came down. He sucked his breath in sharply. He had had that dream last week! The illusive dream he never recalled.

"I never knew where my family was, in the dreams. I couldn't help them," Jennifer said sadly.

Trellis leaned against the sun-warmed wall. His head swam with incense and the weirdness of the conversation, but what troubled him more were all the nuclear war images he'd ever stored up trying to leak out, every mushroom-clouded nightmare he'd ever dreamed. Nobody talked about nuclear bombs anymore. Atomic bombs were a part of the sixties. They were yesterday's fears. Weren't the bombs locked up safely or destroyed now? "Really, ma'am, this is ... interesting ... but I think you're going to have to move the trailer." He stood, being careful not to thump his head on the ceiling. "Um ... what was that you said about the sword of Damocles?"

She considered him for a moment, still leaning forward. "You came all the way out here to see us. Most people can't come this far. You should see the rest. Come downstairs. Would you tell the folks outside that we'll be a few minutes?"

Trellis opened the door. Sunlight glinted off windshields, and he could hear automobile traffic again. "The lady asks you to be patient." The Marine Corps guy shrugged. The line looked like it had gained a few more people since he'd come in.

The closing door shut out all noise.

Jennifer opened the curtain. "Watch the step," she said as she started down. "There's no banister."

A long flight of stairs lit by a light at the bottom fell before him.

"How can you have stairs in a trailer?" After a few steps, he knew he was below the surface of the parking lot. "You'll get in trouble for excavating on mall property." But the roughly carved rock walls didn't look new, nor did the rock stairs worn to a groove in the middle appear freshly quarried. His fingers trailed down the stone as he descended, and patterns cut into the cool rock passed beneath them, like hieroglyphs or maybe something even older: cave carvings, perhaps. When he came back, he decided, he'd look at them more closely with his flashlight.

"The mall's a Johnny-come-lately," said the woman. "Besides, the stairs come with the trailer."

The descent emptied into a round chamber fifty feet across with a domed ceiling lit by a large chandelier dangling from chains in the middle and four muted lamps mounted on wall sconces. Chilly, dry air moved across Trellis's face. The hooded man and Chastity sat on a long stone bench in the middle of the room, facing them. A shadow fell across the man's face, so Trellis couldn't see his expression, but he was breathing hard. Chastity's head hung low, and her hands rested flat on the bench, like a woman so tired she'd never get up again.

"Where's the lady who came down here with you?" Trellis couldn't see a door or any place where someone could hide.

Jennifer said, "She made a blessing for all of us."

The man on the bench swept back his hood to reveal a black border of hair around his mostly bald head. He had a vaguely Arabic cast to his skin. "We're suicide bombers," he said, his hand draped loosely over the knife.

Trellis wondered if his walkie-talkie would work underground or if it wasn't already too late for him to think such thoughts.

"Nobody covers us on the ten-o-clock news, though," said Jennifer. "People don't even see us unless they are already looking." She walked across the room to her sister. "Your turn to work the trailer. Maybe a cup of tea would do you some good."

Chastity sighed and gathered herself. "That woman had kids, she told me. An eight-year-old girl and four-year-old boy. I begged her not to go through with it, but she did. I don't like the ones with kids."

"Where is she?" Trellis asked again.

Chastity said, "Over 2,300 people are reported missing every day. Some never turn up."

The hooded man looked at her, clearly annoyed. He turned to Trellis. "Didn't you ever wonder how suicide bombers could do it? Strap the explosive around their chests. Give up everything they ever will have for what? To kill a handful of people. Even the most successful ones don't get more than a score or two. Doesn't the trade seem inequitable? Everything for a few lives, and they have to know that their single sacrifice won't make the difference. Most of the time they aren't even killing their enemies. They're just killing. They have to have seen the results of the other bombers' work. A line or two in the newspaper. Maybe a poster in their neighborhood celebrating their gesture. That's it. Conditions don't change. So how do they do it?"

"Are you saying that woman blew herself up? I didn't hear an explosion."

"It's for the magic," said the hooded man. "There's magic in the sacrifice, they figure. If they make the sacrifice, then the gods will smile at them to drive their enemies away. They do it to better the world. They think they are saving lives in the long run, making the world a better place."

"But it's evil. What kind of motivation is that, suicide for evil?" asked Jennifer. "And their magic doesn't work. They don't really have magic."

Chastity walked past him toward the stairs. "Over 2,300 people a day. Almost 900,000 a year. Some vanish for sacred reasons. I'll bring the next one down."

The hooded man checked his watch. "Good. We're running late."

"Late for what?" Trellis glanced from one to the other. Nothing made sense.

"The clock's ticking. It's just a few minutes to midnight," said the hooded man. "It's always ticking."

"No, it's the middle of the afternoon." Trellis took a step toward Jennifer and the hooded man, not sure of what to do. This situation certainly wasn't a part of mall security training. Behind them, on the other side of the bench, he saw a pit. He sidled around the bench, keeping his distance from the two of them, and the pit's dimensions became clearer. Eight or nine feet across and deep, so deep that he knew now where the breeze he'd felt when he entered the chamber came from.

"We have real magic," Jennifer said, "and better motivation." She turned on the bench so her feet nearly dangled over the drop. "That is the throat of the world."

"Sort of the ultimate wishing well," said the hooded man. He crossed his arms, still holding his black-bladed knife. "We don't toss in coins."

Trellis felt stupid and so weirdly out of place that he wondered if he wasn't still dreaming last night's dream. The air rising from the well tasted like a museum, a clean and dry library breeze that had traveled across a long desert, brushing the tops of dunes and rows of books for hundreds of miles before funneling to his face.

"Magic's like life," said Jennifer. "It's all a trade."

Trellis stood on the well's edge but he didn't feel vertigo or the normal nervousness he had about heights. At his feet, though, a dark wet stain marked the stone, and he knew before he dipped his finger in that it was blood. "What happened to the lady who came down with you?"

"Do you still have nuclear nightmares, Trellis? Do you know how many nuclear warheads there are in the world?" Jennifer stared at him intently. "Twenty-eight thousand, give or take several thousand."

The hooded man said, "She made a trade. I told you, we're suicide bombers. We're antiwar wizards and witches."

The sound of footsteps came down the stairs. Trellis turned from the pit. Chastity led the Marine Corps patch man toward them. Her hand held his as they walked into the chamber. The man's knuckles were white. His eyes were closed. Trellis imagined how hard he must be gripping.

"You might not want to see this." The man with the knife pulled his hood over his head.

Trellis backed away until his hands met the wall.

Chastity stood on her tiptoes to whisper into the Marine Corps

man's ear. He mouthed something back to her, and with evident difficulty, let go of her hand. She directed him to the edge of the pit, then faced him toward Trellis, his eyes still closed.

Without a word, the hooded man drew his knife across the candle, as if he were coating the blade. He stepped around the bench to stand beside the man. Their breathing filled the room along with the thudding rush of Trellis's pulse. The hooded man met Trellis's eyes. "It's a one to one trade. One life. One bomb."

He plunged the blade into the man's chest and then pushed him over the edge in a single move.

Trellis blinked. Except for a runnel of blood creeping down the hooded man's wrist and a single drop that fell to the stone floor with a hollow plink, there was no motion and no sound. The rush of Trellis's beating heart seemed to have stopped. No one breathed.

"What did you do?" asked Trellis, his voice a dry squeak.

Jennifer said, "Made the world safer."

Pushing himself away from the wall, Trellis approached the pit's edge. The hooded man and Jennifer moved aside. From the pit, air continued to push steadily out, just as clean and dry as before.

The hooded man crossed the chamber and knelt at a small chest. He took out a towel and carefully wiped the knife blade. A hand touched Trellis's wrist. Jennifer stood beside him. "Somewhere in a Kansas silo or a Russian submarine in the Atlantic or an arms depot in India, what used to be a warhead is now an inert hunk of metal, and thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of people are a little safer. You need the right knife, the right spell, and the throat of the world." She swallowed hard. "And a suicide bomber."

"Did you really kill him?" Nothing about the scene struck him as real. The feeling that he could still be dreaming came to him again. In a moment, he would be back to pursuing starlets, and maybe this time they wouldn't be too slippery to hold. He clenched his fingernails into the palm of his hand, but the pain did nothing to wake him. Was the Marine Corps man still falling? Trellis thought about the line of people waiting outside the trailer, all the people he'd seen gathered at the trailer since yesterday.

"Not killing," said Jennifer. "He allowed it himself. There's a difference."

Blood rushed from Trellis's face. He swayed, and for a second he wondered what would happen if he fainted. "You're monsters."

Jennifer's eyes teared up. "Yes, I suppose we are. It's hard to live with. I won't have to for long. There's a bomb with my name written on it in my future." She still held his wrist. "There may be no forgiveness for us, what we do here, but we're small monsters stopping giant ones, and the victims here are volunteers."

Chastity's voice came down the stairs. "Are you ready for the next?" She sounded profoundly tired.

Trellis twisted his wrist away, covered his nose and mouth as if the air were poisonous, a contagion to be blocked. Halfway up the stairs, he nearly knocked over an old man wearing a bathrobe holding Chastity's hand. In a blink Trellis stood inside the mall, gasping for breath. Soft music washed over him. A young mom balancing a toddler on her hip put a dollar in quarters into the rent-a-stroller display. Three teenage girls wearing ear phones talked animatedly as they looked into each others' bags from The Gap. "That color would look so good on me," said one. "Oh, you can borrow it whenever," said her friend.

Trying not to stagger, Trellis found an empty table in Café Court. Shoppers came and went carrying trays filled with pizza or hamburgers or rice bowls. Conversations babbled around him. After he'd sat for over an hour, his breathing settled but his muscles hung without an ounce of strength. The mall music played an instrumental version of Barry McGuire's "The Eve of Destruction." A string and piano rendition of Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" followed.

In the music he could hear the stone chamber breathing before the man with the Marine Corps patch pitched backward, the solid thud the knife made when it connected, like a fist hitting a watermelon. But he also heard air raid sirens and the chant of "duck and cover." And for a long time his thinking locked into a droning mantra, the light of a thousand suns the light of a thousand suns the light of a thousand suns. (It was murder, wasn't it, what he saw? Surely murder!) He caught himself sobbing. Seek safety now, he longed to shout to the patrons around him. SEEK ... SAFETY ... NOW, and he wondered how he could have gone day to day for all his years with such denial, such forgetfulness.

How would he go on from today?

Time passed. He knew it did. It didn't matter. All that mattered was what should he do. All that mattered waited in a silver Airstream sitting on the edge of the parking lot, ten feet from passing traffic, a block from a Starbucks to the north, a block from Barnes and Noble to the south, and directly above the throat of the world, a deep, dry and hungry well.

The night guy sat in the chair opposite Trellis. "Mall's closing in twenty minutes, bud, and you haven't started the evening checklist. You all right?"

Trellis leaned back. His vertebrae crackled. How long had he been hunched at the table? He looked around. A couple of the restaurants had pulled their security gates partway from the ceiling, even though they weren't supposed to close up before the end of the day. The dark blue of twilight filled the skylights above.

Nothing about the scene struck him as real. The feeling that he could still be dreaming came to him again. In a moment, he would be back to pursuing starlets, and maybe this time they wouldn't be too slippery to hold.

"I'll be there in a minute." His voice didn't quiver, which surprised him.

The night guy's expression turned concerned.

Trellis forced a smile. "Really, give me a minute."

Soon after the night guy left, Jennifer filled his seat. In the mall's light her hair was more silver than gray and the age rays around her eyes were more pronounced.

"I would have thought you would pull up stakes when I left."

Jennifer shook her head. "You wouldn't call the police. Only people willing to come our way find us."

"I don't know what you mean," he said, but it occurred to him that the night guy wouldn't have known what Trellis was talking about if he had asked him about the trailer.

She wrapped her hands over his. "You didn't answer me earlier. You do have nuclear nightmares, don't you? You wake up at night so sick with fear you can hardly move? That's why you came to us."

Trellis tried to remember. Did he have those dreams often? Were his dreams so horrible that he blocked them from his memory every night? With Jennifer's warm hands covering his own, he was suddenly sure that he did. He'd always had the dreams. They truly were ghastly, and now that he knew, he doubted he would ever fall asleep again with peace in his heart.

He thought Jennifer saw what he was thinking in his eyes. Maybe she'd said this very thing to other souls who quit denying what they'd known all along, who looked up and saw Damocles's dangling sword. She said, "There's magic in the world, Trellis. It's not the magic you think about from fairy tales, but it's there just the same trying to protect you. There's magic out there trying to save us all."

She squeezed his hands once. "There will be a place for you in line, Trellis. There will always be a place for you, when you're ready." She stood to leave. "I have to get back. Midnight's coming." ❧

Somebody Desperately Needed To Be Neil Gaiman

This is a fantasy about Neil Gaiman.
No, not that kind!

BY WAY JENG | ILLUSTRATION BY NATALIA PIERANDREI

Somebody desperately needed to be Neil Gaiman. The only problem was, it was apparently me. My daughter's love hung in the balance. I'd started by reading her *Coraline* at night before she went to sleep because my wife Stephanie told me to. She walked into the bedroom one night holding the book in her hands and said, "Do you think you're spending enough quality time with our daughter?"

I thought that yes, I was. We ate dinner together, sometimes watched television together. The same with movies, and I occasionally drove her to her friends' houses and back when Stephanie was too busy.

But having been married for over ten years, I was not a complete idiot. I put down the magazine I'd been reading and pretended to have come upon a great revelation before saying, "You know, you're right. How about this: next weekend I'll take Wendy to the museum. It'll be a whole day, just the two of us. We can stop on the way back for dinner."

"No," Stephanie said, "you're going to read her a book. This book. It's supposed to be very good. Read it to her and bond. It's quality time. Do it now."

Having no other choice, I went to Wendy's room. She eyed me suspiciously for a moment, and I said, "Okay, kiddo, it's time for bed."

"But Mommy always puts me to bed."

"Tonight is different. Tonight I'm going to do it."

"Mommy lets me watch a half-hour of TV first."

"New parent, new rules. Tonight I'm going to read you a book. It's called *Coraline*." Then I started reading before Wendy could muster another argument.

She listened to me read for an entire hour. It was longer than I'd intended to read to her, but the whole time she'd watched me with eager anticipation. She liked all the descriptions of the people who lived in Coraline's big house, and the things inside, and the people with the buttons for eyes, and just everything about the whole book. It was the first time in years she'd hung on my every word, and it felt grand.

"And then what?" Wendy said when I finished.

"You'll just have to wait until next time. It's time for bed now."

"But that's not fair! I want to know what happens next. Just a little more, and then I'll go right to sleep. I promise."

I'd heard that one before. "Nope." I snapped the book shut and smiled. "You have to go to sleep right now. But if you fall asleep fast, it means tomorrow will get here faster, and then you'll be one day closer to hearing the rest of the story."

"Will you read me the rest of the story tomorrow?"

"If you're good and you do what your mother tells you to."

"Oh, fine," Wendy said, then I tucked her into bed and got ready to go to sleep myself. It was a welcome change. Wendy only ever asked me to help her carry things and open jars, because she thought that was what God invented boys for. This was different. She could have asked Stephanie to read her the rest of the book, but she asked me.

Wendy loved *Coraline*. She couldn't get enough of it. It gave her nightmares and she woke up crying, and then she wouldn't sleep until I took her around the house and proved to her that there were no hidden doors that led to evil alternate dimensions, no evil spirits who would spirit her mother and me away in the night.

Later on, she denied ever crying and could I please read her a new story? So I went to the bookstore and bought *Neverwhere*, which she liked but not as much as *Coraline*.

"The end," I said at the very end of *Neverwhere*. That wasn't in the story. None of them ended that way, but it gave the stories a little more finality than just stopping.

"What are you going to read me next time?" Wendy asked after I tucked in her sheets.

"I'll read you the *Phantom Tollbooth*."

I already had the book all picked out. It had been my favorite growing up, and I was sure she'd like it. Only when I finished, all she said was, "Oh."

Just like that. "Oh."

"Didn't you like it?" I asked.

"Yes." Earlier that year we'd grounded Wendy for a week for lying and told her we'd double it if she ever lied again. Technically, I should have taken away her TV privileges at the least, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"What's wrong?" I asked instead.

"It was all right, but it wasn't as good."

"Sometimes that happens, like you might like a movie and then I might not. It's the same way with books. I'll read you a different one next time."

"Oh. All right. I guess that's okay," Wendy said. Then she turned over and went to sleep. She never even said good night. Not properly.

Over the next few weeks I read her *The Hobbit* and a Hardy Boys mystery. She didn't care for the *Chronicles of Narnia*. But she listened to them all, nodded solemnly through it, and told me that they were okay in that voice children have when they know that you searched high and low for that absolute-must-have-my-life-depends-on-it toy for Christmas, and all you could find was a Barbie doll that wasn't even that popular last year. It's that worst of all voices, because you know that they put it on only because they know that if they do not, it is you who is going to be disappointed. And so I told her next time I'd tell her a better story.

"There are lots of good stories out there," I desperately told her after *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* failed to do the trick. "You haven't even scratched the surface. I'll read you *Charlotte's Web*. It's a very good book. I loved it when I was your age."

Wendy enjoyed the book very much until the end. That made her cry, and this time for real. She admitted it and everything.

"That's a terrible story!" Wendy said. "How come you read me that? It's just makes you sad. That's all it's for, isn't it? I want Mom!"

I retreated to the bedroom as fast as my legs would take me. It was Neil Gaiman's fault. It was all his fault. Nobody else was Neil Gaiman, not J.R.R. Tolkien, Roald Dahl, C.S. Lewis, Lewis Carroll, nor anybody else in the whole of the world. I had to find another Neil Gaiman story or Wendy wouldn't ask for me to tuck her into bed anymore. What was I supposed to do then? It was too late to go back to opening jars and hauling her toys around. Maybe I could've been satisfied with that at one time, but now I'd seen there was a whole new world out there. If I could just get another one of Neil Gaiman's stories, Wendy would ask for me to tuck her in again. Everything could go back to the way it was, all warm and wonderful.

The next day I stopped on the way back from work and bought *The Neil Gaiman Audio Collection* on CD. Then I locked myself in the study and transcribed the stories into my computer. It was a long, grueling affair. The narration went by much faster than I could type, and I had to pause and rewind every few seconds. To transcribe the entire CD took me about five hours, though it went a little faster once I got the hang of it.

I read Wendy the copy of "The Wolves in the Walls," and she listened attentively. No asking for Mom, no crying. Everything was right again in the world. I tucked her into bed, kissed her on the forehead, and promptly began to panic once I reached the safety of my own bedroom.

There were no more books. Oh, there were a few pieces of prose on the shelves that the saleswoman would have been happy to ring up. There were some comic books, but they weren't right. There was hardly any reading to do there. Wendy wouldn't have needed me for that, and I was pretty sure she'd rid herself of me soon enough once the teen years set in. The other Neil Gaiman books in the store were wholly unsatisfactory. They had scenes with drinking, and smoking, and sex. I wasn't ready to have any of those conversations with my daughter. In a few years, maybe, or hopefully never if my careful attempts to shield Wendy from the world had any effect. My only solace was that the CD I'd bought had several stories on it. I'd bought myself a little time, but I needed to think of a more permanent solution before it was too late.

Telling my daughter the truth would only make trouble. What if she went to see for herself? She could walk to the park, climb on board the bookmobile, and check them out of the library for her

unmitigated and unchaperoned reading pleasure. It would take her mere minutes, and there was nothing I could do to stop her.

I had to write a book. There was no helping it, but that was no big deal. In the past I'd built Wendy a few things when she wanted something. There was the tire swing in the backyard, and I made a perfectly acceptable grilled cheese sandwich when the situation called for it. So I sat down at the computer and played two games of Solitaire.

What kind of story was I supposed to write? What was it supposed to be about? At the very beginning it sounded like a difficult but obtainable goal, but once I sat down to write I discovered that I had no idea where to start. It was only by an act of sheer will that I was able to produce anything at all.

I still have a copy of that first story I wrote. I'll copy it here.

Once upon a time, in a land so far away that nobody remembers its name today, there was a man. Something happened to him and he died. The end.

It was an unfulfilling story, and even if it weren't I couldn't read it to my daughter. It had too much violence in it.

Days passed without any progress. Finally, I'd read Wendy every one of Neil Gaiman's stories I had found, except for "The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish." I'd been avoiding that one for obvious reasons. Her birthday was coming up, and the last thing I needed to do was put ideas in her head. Things were beginning to get really desperate.

I nearly asked Neil Gaiman for help. I looked him up on Google and found his website. There was an e-mail address where I could send questions. But what exactly was I supposed to write?

Dear Neil Gaiman,

How are you? Good, I hope. My daughter really likes your stories. She thinks they're positively brilliant. But now I've read them all to her and she still wants to hear more. Do you think you could pop a few off for me? My wife and I are hoping it's a phase, and maybe she'll grow out of it in a few weeks. In the meantime she knows what she wants and has a very loud voice. I would truly appreciate it if you could help me out.

P.S. It must have a happy ending, preferably without any spiders dying, and I would consider it a personal favor if nothing bad happened to any parent.

That would go over splendidly. If I were really lucky, Neil Gaiman would throw the letter away without a second thought. If I were unlucky, there would be something with lawyers and police and a judge who I was quite certain would not understand my plight.

I turned on my computer and played some Solitaire. I went to the kitchen and made myself a sandwich. It was pretty good, and I even took the time to toast the bread to give it that nice crunchy taste. After I finished, I noticed that the refrigerator shelves were dirty, so I spent the next two hours taking out all the food and cleaning it up. As an added bonus I found a few bags of bread with nothing in them but moldy heels, one tupperware box full of brown goo that might have started out as anything, and a can of tuna that shouldn't have been there in the first place.

Stephanie gave me a small lecture about how I never helped out around the house, and why did I start now just to get out of doing something for our daughter? I thought this was intensely funny, because if she had bothered to listen to her own lecture she would have realized that I never did anything around the house precisely because every time I did it was sure to earn me a stern lecture.

"If you don't know how to write, go to the library and look it up," Stephanie said at the very end before stomping off into the next room.

My parents had given me similar advice countless times in my youth. Whenever I had a question that they could not answer they'd tell me to go to the library and find out, as if it were that easy. I suspected they'd never been to a library. Even a cursory visit would have revealed that it was not as easy as walking into a library and screaming, "Does anybody know how many tuna fish are illegally fished every year?"

Which is not to say that you couldn't do that, because you could. It just wouldn't do anything except make the librarians cross. But at that point I'd become so desperate for something—anything—that I even tried that aged advice. I went to the local library, walked right up to the little circle in the center where short gray-haired ladies with long frowns sat behind computers.

"I need a book," I said before I realized how stupid the whole thing was and talked myself into going home. "A book about writing."

"Literature. Section 800," she said, pointing over my shoulder. "Down the main aisle, on your right. If you see books written in French, you've gone too far."

> I never ask people what I'm allowed to write about. No, you see, art's not about permission.

Then she turned back to her computer screen and whatever it was that she had been doing before I'd interrupted her. I think she was playing Solitaire.

I followed the woman's instructions, and was mildly surprised to see that she'd been right. There was a whole shelf of books there, with titles like *Learn to Write in Ten Days* and *Freelance Writing in Your Spare Time*. It was strange to see them there, arranged on their own special shelf. Books about nothing more than the act of writing. They were right there, waiting for me in neat rows. Finally and at long last I had found what I needed all along: a way to cheat. I checked out every one with Dummy, Idiot, Simple, Stupid, or anything of the like in the title.

The books taught me a lot about writing. They taught me how to properly use a comma, which is something that I ought to have learned in grade school but somehow escaped my attention. They also taught me to use short sentences to describe action, and long ones for description. Passive verbs became my enemy. Why should apples be red when they could reflect red or gleam red?

I devoured the books, every one, and when I was done I sat down at my desk once again. I turned on the computer, and a few minutes later I realized that I had become much better at Solitaire than I had ever imagined possible.

There was only one option left at that point; I asked for help. An old friend of mine named Alvin once mentioned that he majored in literature while he was at the University of Iowa. A quick telephone called confirmed that he was indeed familiar with writing, and in fact had been published a couple of times already. A magazine named *Unorthodox* had published two of his poems. He'd also had great success getting short stories into print. Over twenty stories had been published. He rattled off the names quickly, like a hurried mother recites her grocery list, but I had to admit that I didn't recognize a single one. Most of them were the "Something Review" or the "Something Journal." The somethings were people and places I'd never

heard of. They sounded quaint and very distant.

"So what do you write about?" I asked Alvin once he finished.

"Anything," Alvin said. "Everything. Whatever strikes my fancy. Whatever makes my heart sing. That's the artist's prerogative. I never ask people what I'm allowed to write about. No, you see, art's not about permission. Every now and then I'm bound to offend somebody. It's sad, and I hope they don't take it personally, but I'm not about to censor myself just because it might make somebody uneasy. Where's the art in that? You have to be ready to shake people up. That's what art is for."

"Yes." I agreed with him, in concept. Sort of. That was what art was for, but stories were for something different. Stories were for reading to my daughter at night, or enjoying on a beach when I went on vacation. At neither of those times did I need or particularly want to be shaken up. In fact, if anybody had asked me I would have told them I wanted something to remind me that good guys always win, bad guys always lose, and handsome men marry beautiful princesses before walking into the sunset. "But more specifically, what do you choose? How do you decide what's going to happen?"

"I let the characters live their lives." Alvin had the kind of confidence about writing that I could only imagine in my deepest dreams. "I don't ever worry about what's going to happen next. That's not for me to decide. All I do is sit in front of the computer and let the Muses type through my fingers."

Alvin kept on talking, but I didn't pay attention to him. He might have imparted the innermost secrets of the universe to me, but I was not listening. The phone that I'd called him from was on my computer desk. I was sitting at the computer, and even had a window for my word processor open. I wasn't necessarily planning on writing. I'd set the program to automatically open every time I started it up because every time I used the computer I inevitably wanted to look over something that they'd given me at work. Now it stared at me, an imposing screen of solid blue waiting for me to fill it with white text, and I could only wonder how Alvin did it.

Could I have done that? What would have happened if I sat down at that computer, let go of myself, and let whatever spirits haunted the room take control of my fingers and do as they might? I took my free hand off the chair's armrest and set it on the gel wrist pad at the keyboard.

Nothing happened. I didn't feel the faintest twitch in my fingers. Not even a little prickly feeling like when I lay on my arm too long and then rolled over and let the blood in. I felt absolutely nothing.

For a moment, for an excruciating period that lasted somewhere between a wink in a mayfly's life and as long as all the Emperors of China had ruled, I wondered if my soul were empty. It was a scary thing to think. As a child, Sister Beth at the church had lectured me about souls several times. She talked about how God made them and where they went after you died, but she never had any proof for any of it. Presumably I had one. Why, then, no stories?

"Is that so?" I asked at that point. Alvin was still talking.

"Yes, exactly. That's exactly why the world needs authors—new ones, fresh ones—right now. Without them, where are we going to be in forty years? Where are we going to be in twenty, or even ten? Nobody's thinking ahead. Nobody's thinking about the future. But I do, see? That's what writers do. That's why we're different."

"Yes," I said, because agreeing with Alvin was easier than trying to figure out what he'd been saying for the last few minutes. "You're absolutely right. I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner, but I'm glad you said something."

"Happy to!" Alvin said, and I could almost hear his wide grin through the telephone.

"I'm sorry, but I have to run now. But I'll call you about this later so we can finish up the conversation. You've given me a lot to think about."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it. I'll talk to you then."

"All right. G'bye."

Then I hung up before Alvin could change his mind or say anything else. I didn't want to talk to him anymore. I didn't want to talk to any writers anymore. This whole writing thing was all peaches and cream to them. They all had scores of publications, boxes of stories lying around just waiting to be bought, and the love of strangers' daughters everywhere. What did I have? Just a blank blue screen. It was hardly fair.

It wasn't as though anybody asked writers to calculate our expected sales forecasts or run numbers for hypothetical price changes. Nobody would have noticed if one of them botched an attempt to research new vendors or streamline the inventory keeping, but everybody cared if I couldn't come up with a story.

What would Neil Gaiman have done if he were sitting where I was? Probably start writing a story. He'd have one right away, no problem. He was Neil Gaiman. He could do that sort of thing, being Neil Gaiman and all. All he'd have to do is say, "I'm Neil Gaiman. I'll just pop one off before bedtime to keep myself in shape. Only for the practice, mind. This one takes place in the mysterious land of ..."

Right here. It had to take place here, didn't it? Neil Gaiman never wrote about the fantastic lands in the books of my youth. No Narnias

It was not easy being Neil Gaiman. I suspect it's not easy to be anyone, except possibly one of the homeless people by the train station.

or Middle-Earths for him. No, no. His stories took place in our regular world, give or take. *Coraline* happened in a place just like regular life, only twisted and weird, and *Neverwhere* was in between the cracks in everyday life. His stories all happened somewhere that touched our world at the edges and through secret portals long forgotten.

The story had to be about somebody. Somebody ...

Somebody very normal. Very average. Maybe slightly smarter than your average person, or just a bit faster and stronger, but not much. All of his stories were about people just like you could meet on the street. The only difference was that something happened to them, something extraordinary. They had to meet something fantastic and go somewhere wonderful.

Or maybe they met something fantastic from somewhere wonderful? Like a ... Oh, I didn't know. A pixie, or a leprechaun, or one of those little Christmas elves.

Wait a second. A leprechaun? That didn't sound half bad. A leprechaun from the end of the rainbow. So then there had to be a man who met the leprechaun. A man like me, just an ordinary guy, who wanted to find the end of the rainbow and met a leprechaun. They had to go and meet someone, and there would have to be somebody else. A villain who wanted something.

It was only after I was nearly a full page into the story that I realized on a fully conscious level that I was writing at all. It wasn't so much me writing the story as wondering what Neil Gaiman would have done, and then doing that. It was still me, of course, deep down. The ideas had to have come from somewhere in my head, because even I don't believe for one solitary second that his spirit could have infused me and made me write. It was a stupid head game I was playing with myself to make it easier to put words on the screen, but I played the stupid game joyously. I'd have played

Parcheesi with my brain if it would've finished another page.

Writing the story took a couple of weeks, during which I pretended to have strep throat so as to not have to see Wendy and incidentally get out of a little yard work. It did not write itself by any means. That first day, full of the enthusiasm of finally having got something done, I wrote about three pages. After that Stephanie called me to help her with the dishes. Once I got back from finishing the task I couldn't remember what I was going to write next, and after a few minutes of racking my brain I gave up for the night.

Thinking about Neil Gaiman helped. It was the only thing that helped. How would he have written the story? What would he have done? I read every one of his books and dreamed them in my sleep. It gave me nightmares colored in reds and greens and some color that has no name because it only exists in our dreams. Every night I surfed the web for the smallest tidbit of biographical information. Where did he grow up? What jobs did he work? Where had he gone, and what had he done there? I devoured all of the information, digested it, and prayed that my mother was right when she told me I was what I ate.

It was not easy being Neil Gaiman. I suspect it's not easy to be anyone, except possibly one of the homeless people by the train station. You don't have to do very much at all to be one of them. It's as easy as finding a chipped coffee cup, sitting in the cold, and holding out the cup for change whenever people pass by. Anybody can do that, though it's not very fun. Being Neil Gaiman took a lot more. Ideas popped into my head at night, as I showered, on the drive to work, and when I ate dinner. Every time it happened I furiously recited the sentences in an effort to etch them onto the inside of my skull before they realized they were supposed to be in the real Neil Gaiman's head.

After the first week, my boss called me into his office and complained that my weekly status reports had too many small asides. They had little pithy comments at the ends of paragraphs, or nestled in the odd parts where you just had to have something to make it more personable. Conversations with co-workers devolved into my nodding and agreeing a lot. It made me a lot of friends that I wouldn't have made otherwise. Before long I had to excuse myself from minor social engagements early. I sketched notes in messy longhand on a paper legal pad instead of my laptop, because all neat in Times New Roman anybody would have known that my focus was not on Priority Client Gratification Empowerment Action Synergy. At times it felt too easy. Other times I scoured the scraps I had left, sometimes only bits of sentences and half-remembered images, and did my best with them, and admitted defeat.

The only hope I had was to see the miserable ordeal through to the end, write the story, and win back my daughter's love. So on it went. I found pictures of Neil Gaiman and dressed like him when I sat down to write. The time for my haircut came and went with nary a trim. I even began talking like Neil Gaiman, which annoyed everybody to no end. It turns out I'm not very good with accents.

Eventually, I put the last finishing touches on and hit the save button one last time. I printed the story up and took it into the living room like a young boy who's just brought home his first test from school and desperately hopes that it has a good enough score to go onto the kitchen refrigerator. Stephanie looked at it and said, "Is that it? You finished?"

I nodded and said, "Yup. You want to read it?"

"Read it to Wendy first. She's the one you wrote it for, right? Then you can mow the lawn tomorrow."

And Stephanie had a point, so I took it firmly in hand and knocked on the door to Wendy's room. She told me it was all right to come in, and I did.

"I've got a new story for you," I said, and waved the papers to prove it. "It's a Neil Gaiman story."

"Who's Neil Gaiman?"

"An author. The one you like. Here, there's a new story by him. It's brand new. Fresh off the presses. You want to hear it?"

"How come it's not a book?" Wendy asked. I'd like to say that it made me sad that she was getting to that age where she started questioning everything I said, but the truth was that she'd always been like that. She asked about anything that didn't match her expectations.

"I downloaded it off the Internet. It's brand new. Not even in stores." I took the chair from her desk and pulled it over next to the desk, the way I always did when I told Wendy stories before she went to sleep.

I read Wendy the story, and she watched me attentively the entire time. She often did this when I read her stories that she liked. It was one of the best ways to know whether or not I'd picked out a good one. She was very honest, and never bothered to stay awake for a story when she could have been getting perfectly good sleep instead.

When I was done, I fluffed the papers in my hand and tapped them against the edge of the bed to line them up properly. Then I said to her, "So? What did you think?"

"You downloaded it from the Internet?" Wendy said.

"Yes. I told you, it's very new."

"It's not as good as the other ones."

"You don't think so?" I asked. It would have been too much to tell her that I quite liked it, so I didn't.

"No," Wendy said, and she dug deeper into the covers. "It was all right, but it wasn't as interesting as the other stories. But thanks for looking for it, Daddy."

"Oh. Well, what didn't you like about it?" Was it the ending? It had to be the ending. I'd never been completely sure about it. Neil Gaiman's voice in the back of my head had said I should keep working at it, even at the very end.

"I don't know. It's just not as good."

"Oh. Well, if you want there might be some other stories. Better ones. Just give me a few days to find them, and I think I could get more."

I wanted to say something else. Was it Rupert, the man I had invented? Or his adventure at the end of the rainbow? If it were just the end, she would have said so. It had to be something more subtle than that. Maybe she thought I'd taken too long establishing all the background in the beginning, though truthfully I'd cut out a lot of that. Maybe more than I should have? I had the rest of it on my hard drive. It would've only taken a second to put it back in.

"No," Wendy said with the finality that children have when it comes to toys they know they do not want, no matter how difficult it was to find them. "It's all right. Maybe he's not a good writer anymore. I'm sleepy now. Will you read me some other story tomorrow? Good night, Daddy."

And then Wendy turned over and pulled the covers up to her neck. I didn't know what else to do, so I turned off the light and left the room.

"Well?" Stephanie asked when I sat down on the living room couch.

"She didn't like it," I said.

"I'm sorry. But you know how kids are. They only like what they like."

It's now been some time since I wrote that story, and when I read it I experience an odd mix of feelings. I remember writing bits and pieces of it, making certain decisions, and I still think there are small parts that are very clever. But I also wonder what I was thinking, and how could I have thought that any of it would work? Sometimes I think that I should change it, fix it, heal it. But I never have, and I suspect I never will. Wendy is older now, and sometimes she announces that she's going to bed and she can tuck herself in all by herself.

The story sits on my hard drive, where it waits in a dusty electric corner, hiding from the spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations that surround it on all sides. Every now and then I think of ways that I might improve the story. There are bits I could change at the end, and parts to add in the beginning, and I know that there are words that don't quite fit sprinkled all around. But every time I have one of these ideas I consider it carefully, wonder if it would work, and deliberately forget that I ever had the thought at all. Wendy already made her choice. She swapped Neil Gaiman for me, fair and square. I know better than to tell her that she could have had two goldfish instead. ❧

Ours to Fight For

BY JIM C. HINES | ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID PALUMBO

When war is declared friends can become enemies and neighbors, threats. Who cares if you've known them all your life? Everyone knows their kind always sticks together.

Three days after the bombing, the air raid sirens still made Peggy Turner jump.

She knew it was a test. The grandfather clock in the hallway read five o'clock sharp. The oscillating howl tore through Detroit at the same time every day. Peggy dug her nails beneath the metal edging of the Formica countertop and waited for the all-clear signal.

Her imagination added another sound, a low buzz that reminded her of bumblebees. Her sixteen-year-old son Will had been the first to hear it. She remembered his footsteps pounding across the linoleum as he ran to the front door to stare at the moonlit clouds.

Like gleaming gold hawks, the elven bombers dove out of the full moon. They were quieter than U.S. planes, and the propellers were lower in pitch.

There was no time to get to the bomb shelter in the garden out back. Even as Peggy dragged Will to his bedroom, explosions thundered in the distance.

Four carved wooden staves stood at the corners of Will's bed, pipe clamps securing them to the bedposts. Peggy shoved him onto the mattress, then grabbed the brown shroud from the floor. She had spent close to a hundred dollars of David's death benefits for the enchanted shroud, and Will crumpled it beneath the bed like dirty laundry. Tossing the shroud over the posts, she muttered the incantation and prayed.

Even as she climbed in after her son, she could feel the shroud stiffening. The material should last for thirty minutes, protecting them from debris and shrapnel. Against a direct hit, the shroud was useless, but from the sound of the bombs, the elves were targeting the factories.

Ten minutes later, it was over. The elf bombers disappeared into the moonlight, transported back across the ocean by the same wild magic that allowed them to devastate city after city before the American planes could arrive.

Ten minutes to ruin Peggy's life. The Willow Run bomber plant where she had worked for the past year was destroyed. When the sun rose the next morning, the seeds scattered by elf bombs had already begun to grow. Black oak saplings sank their roots into the concrete, crumbling what was left of the mile-long factory.

"Hey Mom, look at this!"

Will's voice yanked her back to the present. By the time he poked his blond head into the kitchen, her hands no longer trembled.

"The school's running an art contest on Monday. What do you think?" He unrolled a poster and spread it over the counter.

A grotesquely exaggerated elf girl leered from behind black trees. The tattered flags of Germany, France, Italy, and a dozen other nations lay scattered on the ground. The caption read, "Fight the greenshirts! Recycle your scrap metal!"

The handwriting was sloppy, as always, but the artwork was quite good. Peggy grimaced. The girl wore the dark green uniform of the Erlkönig, the elf king in Europe. Her pointed ears curved like the devil's horns, and her short brown hair was a tangled mess.

"Is that supposed to be Vicki?" Peggy asked.

Will flushed and grabbed the poster. "It's not ... it's just an elf, that's all."

"Vicki Johnson used to be your friend," she said, weariness filling the wake of her fear. "You used to pick dandelions together in their yard." If she closed her eyes, she could see both children running into her kitchen for popsicles, their cheeks yellow with dandelion dust.

"That's before the Erlkönig decided to wipe us out. Before they killed Dad." Will turned away and took a deep breath. He tugged a folded square of paper from his back pocket. "I'm not a kid anymore, Mom. I know you can't afford to take care of us both. Not with the plant closed. There aren't any jobs. Rations are tighter, and ...."

As he unfolded the papers, Peggy spotted the familiar logo of the U.S. Army at the top. Her chest tightened. "Those are enlistment papers."

Will flattened the papers over his poster, obscuring the elf's face. "The Emergency Wartime Recruitment Act says I can enlist at sixteen with a parent's consent."

White light flashed in the window. Peggy yanked the curtains aside, grateful for the distraction. The glass was cracked from the bombing, but she couldn't afford to get it repaired.

She couldn't see the Johnsons' front yard from here, but a cloud of red smoke was rising past their roof. She hurried out the front door.

White fire covered the wooden cross planted in the middle of the Johnsons' front lawn. The flames mostly obscured the runes carved into the wood.

"Wow," Will whispered.

"Get the hose." The Johnsons' door hung open. Peggy ran across the gravel drive and hurried inside. "Vicki! Shannon!" The house was silent. "Is anyone here?"

The layout of the Johnsons' home was similar to her own, another Sears Roebuck prefab from the thirties. She searched through every room. Broken dishes littered the kitchen, and a butcher knife was buried in the plaster wall. Smears of blood covered the stove. The klan must have waited for the air raid siren test, using those few minutes to cover the sound of their attack.

On the way out of the house, she spotted Will pulling out his pocket knife. He stepped toward the hedges where the neighbors wouldn't be able to see. Glancing around, he pressed the blade against his hand. Before Peggy could cry out, he gave the knife a quick tug.

He looked around a second time. Peggy drew back. She peered through the doorway, watching as he folded the knife back into his pocket and picked up the hose. He held his bloody palm in front of the nozzle, spraying blood and water onto the flames.

By the time she stepped outside, the fire was out. Red smoke continued to rise from the charred wood. A few of the neighbors had stepped onto their porches, but with the fire out and the klan gone, they simply watched.

"Are Vicki and Shannon all right?" Will asked. He kept his left hand clenched tight, close to his body. "I imagine they're pretty shaken up."

"They're gone." She stared at the cross, then turned to look at Will. She felt sick to her stomach. "What did you do?"

"You told me to—"

"Why did you cut yourself?"

Will stared at the hose. "You saw that?"

Her hands dug into her sleeves. Deep in her gut, she knew the

Spotting towers and antiaircraft guns were all but useless against a foe who could materialize out of nothingness, then disappear into the moonlight once their mission was complete. Every full moon the golden planes appeared, hunting their targets with ruthless speed and efficiency.

answer. "Will?"

"Water won't put out klanfire," Will mumbled. "You need blood, too. Human blood."

"Where did you learn about klanfire?"

He didn't say anything.

Peggy could have wept. "Vicki was your friend."

"Well, she's not anymore," Will snapped. "You should see her. Always flirting and fighting with everyone at school. She acts like she's better than the rest of us, and the teachers all put up with it because everyone's terrified. Nobody wants our elves to join up with the greenshirts, so everyone kisses their skinny asses instead."

"How long have you been ..." The smoke dried her throat, filling her mouth with the taste of burnt meat. "When did you join the Ku Klux Klan?"

"I'm not a member," Will said. "One of the kids at school, his parents are in the klan. Do you remember when I was getting into all those fights? It's because some of the seniors knew I used to be friends with Vicki. They called me an elf-lover. Charlie stuck up for me. He said we all make mistakes when we're young. The important thing is that it's never too late to change, to start showing the elves and the niggers and all the rest who's in charge."

Grief and hate twisted his expression until she barely recognized him. Bad enough she had lost David, Will's father. Looking at his face, she felt like she was losing her son as well. "Where are they taking Vicki?"

Will shrugged.

"Do you really want to see her lynched?" For the first time since she saw the burning cross, Peggy realized she was afraid. Not of the klan, but because she truly didn't know how Will would answer.

"They're not going to lynch her," Will said at last. "They were going to scare her, that's all. Knock some humility into her."

Will had known and said nothing. While the klan readied their attack, he had been busy drawing his poster. "Where did they take her?"

"Mom, you can't." Will looked her in the eyes. "I heard them talking a few days back. The klan brought in one of their wizards from Illinois. Klanfire's nothing. They can—"

"Whatever horrible things they can do, imagine them doing it to Vicki."

To his credit, Will paled a bit at that thought. He swallowed and squared his shoulders. "Promise me you'll sign my enlistment papers."

"What?"

He pulled out the papers. "Let me enlist, and I'll tell you what I know." When Peggy didn't move, he said, "I'll be old enough in six months anyway. It's what I want to do. To protect my country, like Dad did."

"To protect your country, or to get back at the elves for killing him?"

Now it was Will's turn to fall silent. Peggy yanked the papers from his hand. "So my choice is to let my son join the army, or to watch him join the klan?" She crumpled the forms into her pocket. "Help me find them, and I'll sign."

"I heard them talking about the klan wizard a few days back. They were planning something over at Water Works Park. Something that required a few 'volunteers.' I didn't think they meant Vicki. Honest."

Peggy didn't trust herself to answer. She turned back to her house, leaving Will to stare at the charred cross.

Propaganda posters lined the inside of the bus. In one, a man in a dark suit climbed into his car, over a caption that read, "Drive alone, and you drive with the Erlkönig. Conserve gas!" Another showed a soldier in a fresh-pressed uniform saluting his family. That one read, "To Support and Defend." Peggy looked away. Will seemed unable to take his eyes off of it.

She shifted positions. The pistol she had taken from home pressed uncomfortably against her ribs. The Fusil Delfe nine millimeter was a French weapon of elven make. David had sent it home after the race riots two years earlier. The semi-automatic pistol was slender, almost feminine, with an extended barrel and a clip that would hold twelve shots.

It was the last gift he had sent her before his death.

Out of nowhere, Will said, "A few of the teachers say we should surrender." He raised his chin, as if he was daring her to answer.

"What do you think?"

"I think they're cowards." He stared at the posters. "You know, Vicki would have been fine if she had just gone to the enclaves with the rest of the elves."

Peggy barely blinked at the jump in topic. "The law doesn't require her to go until she's eighteen. Until then, she can stay with her legal parents."

"Why did they adopt an elf, anyway?" Will shook his head. "Human babies weren't good enough for them?"

"Will ..." Peggy searched for words, but found nothing that would break through her son's anger. And then the bus was slowing, and her chance was gone.

The bus dropped them more than a mile from Water Works Park. Even from here, Peggy could see the standpipe in the park silhouetted against the sky, its Victorian peak touching the clouds. While it hadn't been used as a water tower for more than fifty years, the city had kept the standpipe as a tourist attraction. After the first raids on U.S. soil, it had been converted into a spotting tower. Not that it made any difference.

In the past four months, the elves had hit Manhattan, Los Alamos, Chicago, and now Detroit. Spotting towers and antiaircraft guns were all but useless against a foe who could materialize out of nothingness, then disappear into the moonlight once their mission was complete. Every full moon the golden planes appeared, hunting their targets with ruthless speed and efficiency.

"What else can you tell me about klan magic?" Peggy asked as they walked.

"Not much. The klan has to use runes and wands and devices, just like any other human. They do a lot with blood, too." Will shoved his hands in his pockets. "I've never seen them do klanfire before. We just talked about it."

An enormous stone gate blocked the path into the park. Fortunately, the pillars and domes and scrollwork covering the monument made it easy to scale. Peggy glanced around to make sure nobody was watching, but the streets were quiet. She started to climb. "Come on," she said.

Will backed away. "I never said I'd fight the klan with you."

Peggy pulled out the crumpled enlistment papers. "Do you want me to sign these or not?"

Will's face darkened, but he climbed after her. "Why are you so determined to save them, anyway?"

She couldn't believe her son had asked that question. Closing her eyes, she pushed the shame aside. "What makes you think I'm trying to save them?"

A flash of light drew Peggy's attention to the tower. The light vanished before she could focus, leaving only the afterimage of a glowing ball rising from the ground like a comet. Whatever the klan was doing, it was no simple lynching.

"What was that?" Will pulled himself to the top of the gate, beside Peggy.

"I don't know." Peggy jumped down on the other side and pulled out the pistol. She double-checked the safety, then slid the gun into her pocket.

"I hate this place," Will said as he followed her along the winding path. "Too many trees. They ought to pave the whole thing."

When had he become so hard and bitter? She had been so caught up in her own grief over David, and then it had been all she could do to take care of the house and keep up with her work at Willow Run. So with his father dead and his mother distracted, Will had turned elsewhere. And she hadn't even noticed.

Peggy hurried toward the overgrown mound where the old floral clock used to sit. She pulled Will down beside her just as a second

flash made her squint. This time she could see a ball of white-blue lightning shooting from the ground. It curved toward the tower before shooting into the sky, igniting the clouds from within as it dissipated. There was no thunder. Only a faint sizzling marked the lightning's passage.

"They've really got a wizard," Will breathed.

Peggy peered around the edge of the mound at the group of men who stood near the base of the tower. They wore white robes, and stood around some sort of machine. Most carried shotguns.

Black smoke curled at their feet. The one closest to the machine wore fancier robes than the rest. The wizard, no doubt. Red ribbons formed a cross on the front of his hood and red stripes decorated his sleeves. A black sash with a patch of the U.S. flag hung from his left shoulder.

Where were Vicki and Shannon? She moved closer, trying to stay within the shadows of the trees. Not that it seemed to matter. The men were completely absorbed by the machine resting on the cobblestones. One of the men shifted position, giving Peggy a better view.

"I didn't know," Will whispered. "They never said anything about this."

Vicki Johnson lay tied to a pyramidal frame of iron. Within the pyramid, a small engine coughed like an automobile, spitting the smoke that flowed around the men like black fog.

Peggy's skin tingled. Her eardrums popped, and her eyes watered. Blue sparks leapt from the top of the machine like oversized fireworks. Vicki arched her back, tugging against the chains that held her in place. Her face was bloody and the sleeves had been torn from her shirt. Blood dripped down her arm from numerous cuts.

The air grew heavier, and the sparks brightened. Vicki's dark hair rose from her scalp. She tensed, the muscles in her arms clearly visible. She looked like she would rip her bones from their sockets. And then another ball of lightning leapt from the top of the machine, and Vicki collapsed. As before, the lightning curved toward the tower.

Peggy spotted a woman tied to the railing on the balcony, about two thirds of the way up the tower. "Shannon."

"They said Mrs. Johnson needed a lesson too," Will said, staring at the tower.

"Be quiet." Peggy moved closer, straining to hear over the chugging sound of the engine.

The wizard was shaking his head. "She's controlling it somehow. Steering the lightning off target to protect her mother. Goddamned elves." From his casual tone, it wasn't blasphemy so much as a simple statement of fact.

Another of the white-robed figures brought a black bag toward the machine. "Are you ready for the chloroform?"

"Small doses." The wizard stepped back. "Just enough to disrupt her control. Keep her conscious if you can."

Peggy pulled out her gun. Will grabbed her elbow.

"One little pistol against seven men? They've got shotguns, and one's a wizard."

"They're going to kill Shannon. Vicki too, probably. Will, if you enlist, you'll face far worse than this." Peggy waited, a part of her hoping he would be too frightened. That he would realize he wasn't ready and stay here where he would be safe.

"You're right." He straightened and pointed to a tree beside the path. A Celtic cross had been carved into the bark, with a smear of something dark in the center. "That's a blood cross. They use it as a ward. Anyone who wants to enter the circle has to give a drop of blood. If the blood is impure, or if you try to sneak past, the cross summons the dragon's breath. That's like klanfire, only hotter."

Peggy didn't ask how he knew. She simply waited while he pulled out his pocketknife. He used the tip to reopen the cut on his hand from earlier.

Peggy held out her hand.

Will hesitated. "I can't cut my own mother."

Peggy took the knife and cut the meaty part of her left thumb. Will cringed, but didn't turn away.

"Wait for the next bolt of lightning," Peggy said, clutching her fist. They didn't have long to wait. Her skin tingled as the magic gathered.

When the next bolt fired, Peggy squinted and hurried up the path. Will stopped long enough to smear his blood onto the cross. Peggy did the same, following his lead.

The wizard was already turning toward them when Peggy pointed her gun at the center of the cross on his hood. The other klansmen raised their weapons.

"Put the guns down," Peggy yelled. From here, she could see leather straps holding Vicki's wrists. "Will, cut her free."

Her voice held no room for debate.

Will still carried his bloody pocketknife. He edged toward the machine.

"Traitor."

The hoods prevented Peggy from knowing who spoke, but Will recognized the voice. She could see it in the way his shoulders tightened. This was someone he knew.

"Let's everybody calm down." The wizard took a half-step forward, glanced at Peggy, and stopped. He turned to her son. "Will ... you're the one who told us about this girl, aren't you?"

Vicki stared at Will. Her right eye was bruised and swollen.

Will shook his head. "I didn't know about this. I thought—"

"I know, and I'm sorry we had to mislead you. I want to be able to trust you, Will. Truly I do. But these days, we must be cautious." The wizard folded his arms. "Did you know that every single elf has refused service in our armed forces?"

"Don't talk to him," Peggy snapped. He sounded so calm, so rational.

"Why not?" The wizard turned toward her. "Are you afraid to let your son make his own choices?"

Yes.

"It's okay, Mom." Will slipped a knife under the first strap and began to cut.

"Good boy," Peggy whispered, too softly for anyone to hear.

"They won't fight their own," the wizard went on, apparently unconcerned. "Their loyalty lies with their race, not with their nation. They go to their enclaves, safe from the raids, and wait for their people to triumph. Do you think that girl would choose you over her own people?"

Will hesitated.

Peggy's hands shook. Uncertainty stopped her from pulling the trigger. What would Will do if she fired? Would he understand, or would the shock turn him against her? "Vicki would never betray you to the Erlkönig. You know that."

"This machine could protect us." The wizard pointed to the engine, where whirring belts spun an array of black cylinders. Thin steel combs scraped the surface of the cylinders. From here, Peggy could make out the faint, scratchy sound of voices chanting. "The runes and chants of human magic require close to an hour to summon a single lightning bolt. But elves are magic. With her blood feeding the machine, I could summon a bolt every minute. Imagine these machines atop every spotting tower in Detroit. The next time the elves attack—and they will attack again—their planes will be enveloped before they can drop a single bomb."

Peggy stared at the engine. What she had taken to be oil coating the machine was actually a thin layer of blood. "And how many children would you murder to protect us?"

"As many as it takes." He raised his hands in silent protest. "I know what you would say, and I share your distaste. But I've been there. I've seen the forests. I helped liberate one of the London camps, only to watch those we saved die in agony from the seeds the greenshirts forced down their throats. I've fought elves, watched them slaughter entire platoons. I will not let these monsters destroy the country I love."

He fell silent as another ball of lightning leapt from the top of the machine. Peggy wasn't sure, but she thought this one passed closer to the tower before disappearing into the sky. If Vicki was somehow protecting her mother, her efforts were growing weaker.

"Will, your father loved this country too," Peggy said. "What would he do if he were here?"

Will cut the strap. He moved around Vicki, reaching for her other wrist.

One of the klansmen raised his gun.

"Will!" Peggy shifted her aim.

Vicki was faster. With her free hand, she grabbed Will's arm and flung him to the ground. She twisted her body out of the way as the klansman fired. Buckshot ricocheted from the iron frame where Will and Vicki had stood a heartbeat before.

Peggy pulled the trigger.

The man who had tried to shoot her son staggered back, and then the wizard touched a heavy gold ring on his right hand. White fire enveloped Peggy's gun. She managed to fire a second time before flinging the gun to the ground. The flames died the instant the gun left her grip, leaving her hands red and blistered.

Another man leapt forward, swinging his rifle at Peggy. She twisted, but the stock still grazed the side of her head. She dropped, groaning and clutching her burnt hands to her chest. She saw Vicki sawing at the other strap. Vicki must have wrested Will's knife away before shoving him down.

The wizard noticed at the same time as Peggy. "Kill her!"

Vicki tugged free and leapt away from the machine. Two more shotguns fired, but Vicki was too fast. She rolled, snatching Peggy's pistol from the ground and rising to one knee.

Six times Vicki fired, so fast the pistol could have been an automatic weapon. The wizard was the last to fall, a single gunshot through the center of his robes. Then Vicki turned the gun toward Will.

It happened so quickly. Vicki had killed six people between one breath and the next, and she looked perfectly capable of killing Will.

Peggy pushed herself to her feet. Her head pounded. She staggered, but managed to keep her balance. "Vicki Johnson, you put that gun down now."

Slowly, Vicki turned around. Almost absently, she reached out and flipped a switch on the machine, killing the engine. "But he—"

"He made a mistake," Peggy said firmly. She pointed to the tower. "Go and help your mother."

Vicki looked so young. Despite being Will's age, she could have passed for twelve years old. Her left arm was bleeding, but she didn't appear to notice. One of the gunshots must have grazed her.

"She needs your help," Peggy said.

Vicki nodded. The gun dropped from her fingers. As she raced to the tower, Peggy hurried to her son.

Will was doing his best to stop shaking. He dug his fingers into his arms, and his muscles were tight as rock.

"She would have killed me," Will said.

"No, she—" Peggy hesitated, looking at the bodies sprawled around them. She shook her head, unable to think about how close she had come to losing him. "She's angry and scared."

"They're so fast. So strong. She's always been stronger." He turned to look at the body of the wizard. "Mom, what if he was right? The Erlkönig ... what if we can't stop them? What if it's us or them?"

Peggy stood and picked up her gun. She fired the remaining bullets into the audio cylinders, which shattered into fragments of black plastic.

She watched Vicki disappear into the tower. "Is Vicki one of them?" She wiped sweat from her face, and her sleeve came away bloody. "These men in their robes, are they us?"

Will didn't answer.

"Go help Vicki and her mother," she said gently.

He looked uneasy, but jogged toward the tower.

Peggy waited for him to go, then picked up the discarded pocketknife. She walked up the path and gouged the blade through the Celtic cross, hopefully obliterating any magic that remained.

By the time she finished, she could see Will stepping on the balcony to help Vicki. Police sirens wailed in the distance. She stared at the bodies on the ground, the blood bright red against the klan robes. Their shadows had begun to grow as the sun sank in the sky.

Her feet crunched broken plastic as she walked to the tower to join her son. ❧

letter to nancy

Continued from page 40

in their slings, that they had crutches for their injured legs. That the blind ones had a set of eyes to lead them off the boat. Molly always smiled, even at the blind ones. They could hear it in her voice when she spoke to them.

The boat arrived in Dover, like something out of a dream. Like they'd traveled from one world to another, from a city of blood back home to a land of green pastures and gray fog.

Molly helped Private Andrews off the gangplank to the dock. He still wore a bandage over his missing eye, but it was clean now. His face was mostly visible, showing scars and stitches on his jaw, cheek, and forehead. His shaggy brown hair made him look younger, somehow.

A crowd waited, old men and women mostly—parents. Some young wives with children, all waiting for glimpses of their sons, husbands, and fathers limping home. Still waiting for her own reunion, Molly always felt a little jealous when she saw them.

Andrews had no one to meet him, so she looked for one of the white-garbed nurses from the army hospital she could transfer her charge to.

"Let's wait here a moment," she said, guiding him to the side of the street while the crowd ebbed and flowed, its noise crashing over them.

In a moment of calm, a woman stepped forward. The fog thinned, the crowd parted, and there she was, walking from the street where carriages and rumbling autos jostled for place. Dressed primly in a gray wool dress, black gloves and simple cap, she was young, fresh-faced, and smiling. Her yellow hair was knotted in a bun at the nape of her neck. When she saw Private Andrews, she stopped and wrung her hands.

"Ned. Hello," she said, and tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. Molly knew that look, her expression of anxious hope and fear. This was the face of a girl meeting her beloved after too long an absence, wondering if he's her beloved still.

Bewildered, Private Andrews stared back at her.

"Nancy?" He said it softly, hesitating. Even softer he murmured, "Just like I pictured her."

But wishing never made it so, Molly had heard that a thousand times. But did it? If you made a wish, tossed a letter in a bottle into the ocean ... The girl—the wish—stepped forward, uncertain still, but her smile never faltered.

"You're home safe now, Ned. I'm so glad to see you."

Private Andrews's face, with all its new scars, softened into something full of longing.

"What do I do?" he whispered to Molly.

You fear, you mistrust your eyes, you disbelieve and make the phantom disappear. You hope. The girl was solid, she cast a shadow, and Molly knew that if Ned Andrews turned away from her, her young heart would break.

"Go to her," Molly told him, pressing against his back to force him forward.

He looked at her, seemingly torn, something holding him back. Don't look at me like that, she thought. Don't turn that stark desire to me, I don't want it. Can't have it. Go love Nancy.

"Go," she said again.

"Thank you," he said. "I don't know how, but thank you."

Nancy opened her arms to him, not even noticing the bandages and scars, and he stepped quickly into her embrace. They stood twined arm in arm like every other couple meeting on the dock. Reunited. Perfect.

Molly returned to Belgium on the next ship. On the way, she wrote a letter, this one for herself. Put it in a bottle, sealed the cork. Threw it into the ocean. ❧

By Eric T. Baker

Huge plants and piles of corpses are just a few of the mysteries of *The Experiment.*

Anyone who plays video games has a list of at least ten (and maybe more depending on their age and tastes) of games they wish had sold better so that designers would be inspired to make more like them. One such game for this reviewer is *Lifeline,* a game for the PS2 that came out in 2006. In it, the player took the role of man trapped in the security control room of the world's first luxury space hotel. Something terrible has happened to the hotel, his girlfriend is missing, and his only hope of escape and finding her is one of the hotel's waitresses. She's got secrets of her own, but the player guides her through the hotel and the mystery by voice commands issued through a microphone. The player uses the controller for some things, but most of the game was giving voice commands to the waitress character.

Two years later, the designers at Lexis Numerique have created a video game that is similar to *Lifeline,* but in most ways ***The Experiment*** (it also gets listed by its French name: *Experience 112*) is different. For one thing, it is for the PC and for another there is no voice command. In this game, the player doesn't know who he is when he wakes up in the control room, but he has a video feed to Dr. Lea Nichols. The setting is a spooky research ship that is filled with corpses that aren't nearly as decomposed as the size of all the vegetation growing everywhere in and on the ship would indicate.

To solve the mystery of this game, the player uses a point and click interface to control the many cameras around the ship as well as the doors, computers, lights, and occasionally a robot. The player indicates where he wants Lea to go by turning the lights on and off. Lea will go toward lights that come on. On the other hand, Lea knows what was going on in the ship before the disaster, so she is the one who sets the objectives and then does most of the work of picking up clues, manipulating objects, etc.

Dr. Lea Nichols leads the player on a tense adventure through a mystery ship that has suffered a great disaster in The Experiment.

It might seem that taking the role of a character controlling another character would lessen the immersion of the play but, as in *Lifeline,* this conceit actually increases the feel of the reality of *The Experiment* because the player is a person sitting at his computer playing someone sitting at her computer. It's a different power fantasy than jumping impossible distances or gunning down endless hordes of monsters, but as a way of drawing the player into the story, it works great.

The game does have issues. It was made on a relatively small budget, which shows in the polish and

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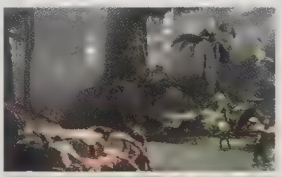
details of the art and interface. The robot control sequences are finicky, and the change of pace they represent is jarring. The thing that takes the most getting used to is the pace of the game. Lea eventually responds to all the "commands" she is given, but she's slow about it. She's slow to start, slow to get there, and slow to respond. Still, for players looking for an adventure game with a story that is tense and well told as well as involving to play out, *The Experiment* is an excellent buy.



A much more traditional gaming experience is ***Turok*** from Touchstone for the PC, 360, and PS3. *Turok* games go all the way back to 1998 and the Nintendo 64. but this is the first one in six years. No need to have played the previous ones, however. This *Turok* starts the series over with a setup that will remind you of *The Dirty Dozen* meets *Apocalypse Now*. Joseph Turok, an American Indian by descent, is now a space marine who ends up on a planet where instead of killing demons or aliens, he turns his shotgun, his bow, and particularly his knife to the killing of dinosaurs.

Touchstone is an arm of Disney and the money they have for projects like *Turok* shows in the voice acting for the game which includes Ron Perlman and Donnie Wahlberg. Similarly, the designers have put their budget into the graphics so that the vegetation of the jungle world where Turok is stranded by the crash of his ship and the textures of the dinosaurs themselves are simply beautiful. And the characters and the dinos look good when they are in motion as well. Humans jerk realistically both when they

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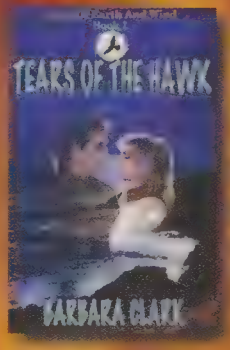

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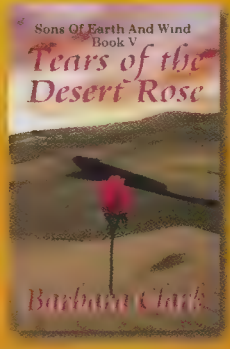

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fire their guns and when they are hit by bullets from someone else's.

Broadly speaking, there are three ways to kill things in *Turok*. The first is use one (or two if the character is dual wielding) of the many guns to shoot the enemy or dino. The second is to use Turok's bow and arrow to kill enemies soundlessly. The bow is essentially a sniper rifle with ammo that can sometimes be picked up after it is shot. The third is hand to hand, usually with the knife. Unlike the other two, hand to hand takes the player to a third-person point of view and asks him waggle a stick or mash a button to trigger a kill animation. Without a doubt, the most entertaining of the three is the hand to hand. The detail of the kill animations, from the ripple of the dino skins to the blood flying from the wounds is such at that it takes longer than the length of the single-player game to get tired of them.

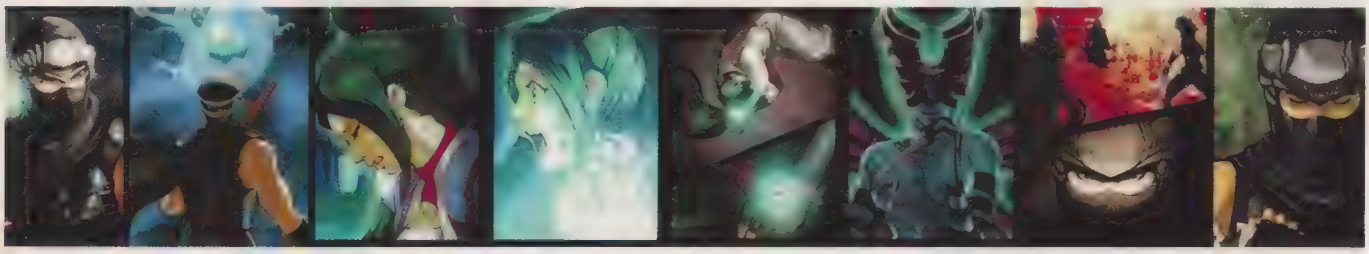
The limitation of *Turok* is that besides the pretty scenery and

gorgeous dinosaurs and the gory kills, there just isn't much going on. Other than Turok himself, who tends toward the anti-side of heroism, there isn't anyone to root for. Nor is there much reason to root against the villains other than they keep trying to kill Turok and his allies. For this reason the multiplayer can be more fun than the single player. In co-op mode, there are markedly more enemies, making the game faster and tenser. In death match, there is the thrill of fighting other humans, plus one of the powerups unleashes random dinosaurs that attack anyone who attracts them.

Turok is a good game for what it is: an excellent simulation of hunting dinosaurs with lots of different weapons in a green and dripping jungle.

Perhaps the least reported part of the "console war" that has been going on since the introduction of the Xbox 360 two Christmases ago is that the true winner in sales over that period is Nintendo's handheld game console, the DS. Available for under $80 and coming with built-in WiFi access, the little consoles have become so ubiquitous that even if you don't already have one, there is probably someone in your immediate family who does.

If you have a DS and you love action or fighting games, there is now a game for you. ***Ninja Gaiden Dragon Sword*** is from the same team that makes the *Ninja Gaiden* and the *DOA* games for the bigger consoles. Those games are particularly noted for their beautiful graphics, stunning cutscenes, and extremely difficult game play. Amazingly, the designers have managed to bring two out of



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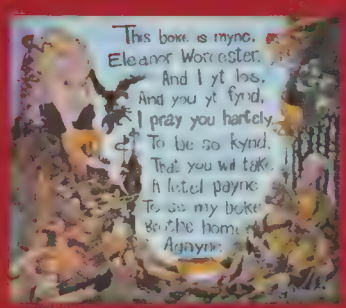

three of those game elements to the DS. Only the extreme difficulty got left behind, replaced by just moderate difficulty.

To play *NGDS*, the first step is to turn the console sideways. All of the control is done on the touch screen. Only blocking is done with the buttons; any of the buttons on the DS can be used. The graphics are 3-D figures on 2-D backgrounds, except for the boss fights where the backgrounds are 3-D as well. For the tutorial, players control the young female ninja Momiji, but once they have the hang of slashing on enemies to attack with swords, tapping on them to throw weapons, stroking up to jump, and putting all these things together to create different combo attacks, they graduate to controlling Ryu Hyabusa, star of the other *Ninja Gaiden* games, for the rest of the adventure.

One of the knocks on the DS as a platform is that it doesn't do 3-D action games the way that other consoles, not even the other hand-held one (the Sony PSP) do. *NGDS* isn't a true 3-D game, but it is so close and it is so well done that it is actually better than the majority games whose best boast is 3-D.

Of course for players who do have an Xbox 360 or a PS3, there is no reason not to go for a fully 3-D game such as ***Devil May Cry 4.*** For this installment of the franchise, the players start out not in control of anti-hero Dante, but of newcomer Nero. The game follows Nero as he seeks to defend his true love Kyrie and to find out why Dante appears to have murdered the leader of the order Nero belongs to. The story bits are told in cutscenes that are as well rendered and as atmospheric as anything currently on the consoles.

The heart of the game though, as with *NGDS*, is action and combos. *DMC4* has a lot more of both, including unlockable weapons, moves, and upgrades. Although Nero totes a sword and a gun, his main weapon is his demonic arm. With it he can pull enemies to him and then fling them about. It is such a versatile and "handy" weapon that it takes some adjusting when the game switches to having the player control Dante about halfway through. Dante has a wide variety of weapons and fighting styles, but he doesn't have the arm.

For all that is good and entertaining about *DMC4*, the frustrating thing about the game is the camera. Since it is a 3-D game, it should be possible to point the camera anywhere. Instead, the designers decided that the player shouldn't control the camera. Sometimes the camera focuses on Nero, so there is no dilly-dally in a critical action scene, but sometimes the game doesn't. And inevitably, the hidden artifacts are always just out of view. It's an odd decision by the designers since most players would cheerfully sacrifice some quality in the graphics if it could be traded for a better view of what is going on.

Still, camera, and a certain amount of repetition in the levels and the boss fights to the side, *DMC4* is a slick and action-packed killfest for those who love over-the-top weapons and martial arts.

Last, but hardly least, is ***Sins of the Solar Empire*** for the PC from Ironclad and distributed by Stardock. Despite Stardock's involvement, *SotSE* is not related to the *Galactic Civilizations* series of games. It is a brand-new franchise and a brand-new game mechanic. While it is a game of space-based combat and resource management and conquest, it is not turn-based. Instead it is a real-time strategy game. The designers like to call it Total Annihilation in space, and indeed that is very much what it plays like.

The scale of the game is star systems, each with many planets, moons, and asteroids.

The very largest games can include five-star systems connected by worm holes, but those are for games taking days and weeks to play.

A single star will provide plenty of conflict for game of reasonable length, but it is nice to have the option to fight on a larger battleground. Players scout for resources and worlds, build ships to harvest and colonize them, and build other ships to protect them and take the enemies' worlds. There are three factions with various ship designs, strengths and weaknesses.

The fear in a real-time game like this is that the player's holdings will grow so large that he won't be able to keep track of them all, but *SotSE* moves at a pretty stately pace (without being too slow) so that even toward the end game, the player can keep up. In addition, there are lots of good design choices in *SotSE* that help the player stay on top of the action. The best is the branching list of holdings and units on the left-hand side of the screen. With it, it is quick and easy to see which units are where and if any are in combat. It is also possible to easily group and move the ships by clicking and dragging within the list itself so the player doesn't have to zoom in and micromanage. If the player wants to zoom in, a simple click does so.

Like most real-time strategy games, *SotSE* allows for online play against other humans. Unlike those other games, however, online games can be saved. This allows online games to take place on larger maps and be much more complicated and involving compared to the average RTS which has to be played in cramped quarters so the game won't drag on for hours and hours. Single or multiplayer though, *SotSE* is a terrific game.

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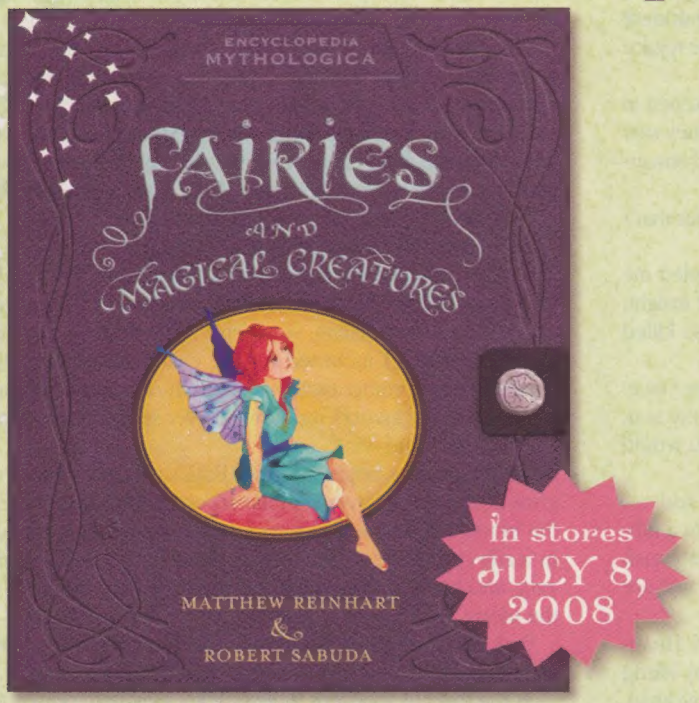

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Continued from page 65

wetness that spilled from me, darkening the straw. My babe would die as soon as he was born. And I could do nothing, helpless as every mother is in the pangs of childbirth.

My body bowed, a gateway of agony, expelling my son into the world. He arrived in a rush of blood and despair. Meng Shouzhen took him before I even had the chance to hold him, severing the umbilical cord with her white teeth.

"No!" I struggled to raise myself, but she easily pushed me back.

She clasped him like a doll, untroubled by birth fluids upon her *shenyi*. Perhaps she'd worn scarlet to mask the blood.

"I'll tell Bei Huangong you're a fox," I panted. "Even if he doesn't believe me, a part of him will be vigilant."

"I do not think you will." She fixed me with burning, golden eyes, predator's eyes to paralyze a trembling rabbit. I couldn't blink, couldn't move, couldn't scream. Mesmerized by those flickering orbs, I was frozen, waiting for teeth to snap shut around my throat.

The mewling of a newborn rabbit called me back. No, not a rabbit, a human. My son. I roused, stumpy ears straining. All was silence. I was alone.

I dragged myself from the mat, shivering, aching, and weak. My fingers were half-numb stubs as I fumbled with the cedar chest's latch. I wrenched it open and pulled out my *ruqun*, wrapping it around me. My trembling lessened, and a thread of vigor warmed me. To think that once I'd railed against my *ruqun*. I knotted the red-gold sash, tucking the moon mirror and sickle knife into its folds.

Staggering from my exile, I scented fox in the corridor. Instinct clamored at me to turn tail; I didn't heed it. The fox-stink led me through the outer courtyard and into the palace, down jade-tiled walkways, until I came to the chambers I'd shared with Bei Huangong. Within, the curdling tang of blood masked the stench of fox.

A still shape lay on the bed, pale and silent. I knew what I'd find, but I crept there anyway.

He was so tiny, so helpless. His throat had been opened by razored teeth, and his blood had poured upon satin and silk. I lifted him, rocking him to my breast. I would have given him my voice, sung lullabies to him in Huang-chan, but he'd never heard me sing, never heard me croon endearments. How would he know to be comforted?

Oh, my son, my kit! This existence is full of suffering. Let me rejoice that your time here was so brief.

We were interrupted by rushing feet. Meng Shouzhen hastened in with Bei Huangong behind her. They halted abruptly when they saw me, and I didn't wonder. I must have looked a sight, blood smearing my *ruqun* and my face twisted with grief.

"We're too late," Meng Shouzhen cried. "It's as I feared. Her madness has driven her to murder her own baby!"

I laid my son on the bed. His empty, lifeless body reminded me of another terrible night and another stolen child. In a burst of insight, I knew that the same fox who'd slaughtered my son had also killed my brother.

"I am not the murderess," I said, marveling at the calm of my voice. See, Nai-nai? You named me well, after all. "You murdered my son, Meng Shouzhen, as you intend to murder my husband, as you would have murdered him if I hadn't dashed across his path."

"Madwoman. She thinks she's a rabbit," Meng Shouzhen said.

I walked, slowly but steadily, to the pair by the door. "I am a rabbit, descended from Bótù." I pulled the moon mirror from my sash and turned its fanciful magic upon Meng Shouzhen. "Just as you are a fox, descended from malice."

Surprise, shock, and comprehension chased across Bei Huangong's face. I knew what he saw in the mirror: a fox in Meng Shouzhen's *shenyi*. He saw her as she was, scheming fox woman, bloodthirsty *huli jing*. The mirror revealed her true nature as surely as it did mine.

She knocked the mirror from my hand. "Preposterous," she snarled. "Some trick."

I caught a fold of her *shanyi* and drew the silver moon-knife. "Is this also a trick?" I slashed away a panel of scarlet silk.

She shrieked, and instead of a length of silk, I gripped a severed fox tail.

I hadn't fully understood what Nai-nai told me before, but I did now. We could take off our silks, fox and rabbit, but they were as much a part of us as our skins. And, unlike me, Meng Shouzhen was an adept shapechanger, modifying her garments from day to day to conform to the dictates of fashion.

I flung the severed fox tail down. "That's for my brother, whom you stole from our *louju* as my mother slept."

"Don't let her hurt me," she whined, casting pleading eyes at Bei Huangong. "I thought only to protect you, my darling stepson."

My husband stiffened, eyes unfocused and face slack.

"The same stepson you tried to lead to his death?" I recalled the thick scent of fox that night, the same fox-stink I smelled now. "You were that deer, *huli jing*. Did you also lure Bei Huangong's father over a drop-off? I think you did."

She snarled. "Clever rabbit. But not that clever." She fixed me with her golden, fiery eyes, confident she could snare me again—weak rabbit, easy prey. But I was not a weak rabbit. I was a fire rabbit. And my soul burned hotter and brighter than the feeble glints of her eyes.

I plunged the knife into her chest, and it sank to its hilt in her black heart.

"Even a rabbit will bite, if you corner her."

I yanked the knife free, and blood fountained over my hands. Meng Shouzhen sank to her knees. Fur bloomed on her face, her hands, and pointed ears sprouted through her hair. She crumpled, and the unmistakable body of a fox lay bleeding on the tile.

Spell broken, Bei Huangong startled awake. "My stepmother, a fox," he exclaimed, "and all this time we never suspected."

"Who knows what other animals might masquerade among you," I said, my voice leaden. "Your wife might even be a rabbit."

He turned to me, stricken. "I'm so sorry, An-ying, so sorry for doubting you."

I met his eyes, and my heart ached. I longed to go to him, to rest my head on his chest and let all the ugliness that had transpired between us be erased in the security of his arms. Then I remembered my son's piteous body. Were he and my brother together in Huang-chan, comforting each other while Mama sang to them?

"Your world is too complicated, too cruel for me," I said. "Even love is treacherous. You guard your hearts, wary of your affections. I thought once that my people bore the greatest burden of suffering, but I see now I was mistaken. My husband, you are sky and wind and rain to me, but I cannot bear the uncertainty of your love, always fearing it might be snatched away. Love is not a gift to be discarded, nor should it be held out as a goad or reward."

Bei Huangong buried his face in his hands.

I bent to retrieve my mirror and walked away. I padded barefoot over glazed tile, so much colder than grass and earth, passed beneath the double-arched ceiling, so much smaller than the sky, and strode into the garden. I mourned for the enslaved flowers, bullied and coaxed to conform to another's criterion of beauty. Slipping free of the stone walls, I wondered how I'd ever seen them as anything but an obstacle to the wind.

The moon was bright and full, Bótù's shadow clear. I raised my arms in wordless prayer, and the silvery light cleansed me, washing the blood and anguish and grief away. No longer a human maiden in a silk *ruqun* but a Daughter of Bótù once more—sleek fur, soft ears, and busy nose—I stood on my hind legs and gave thanks to the moon.

Buddha teaches that suffering ends when desire and craving are no more. All I had to do was renounce my heart's desire.

At the thud of footsteps at my back I swiveled, poised to fly.

"An-ying," Bei Huangong called, "An-ying!"

He sprinted to me. But I'd made my choice. I dropped to all fours and bounded away. ❧

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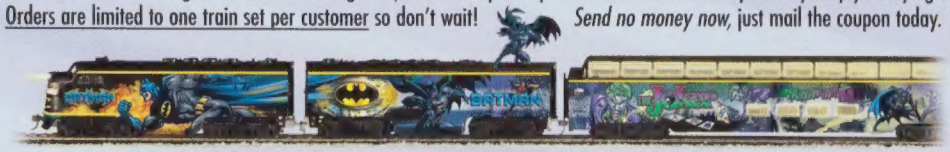

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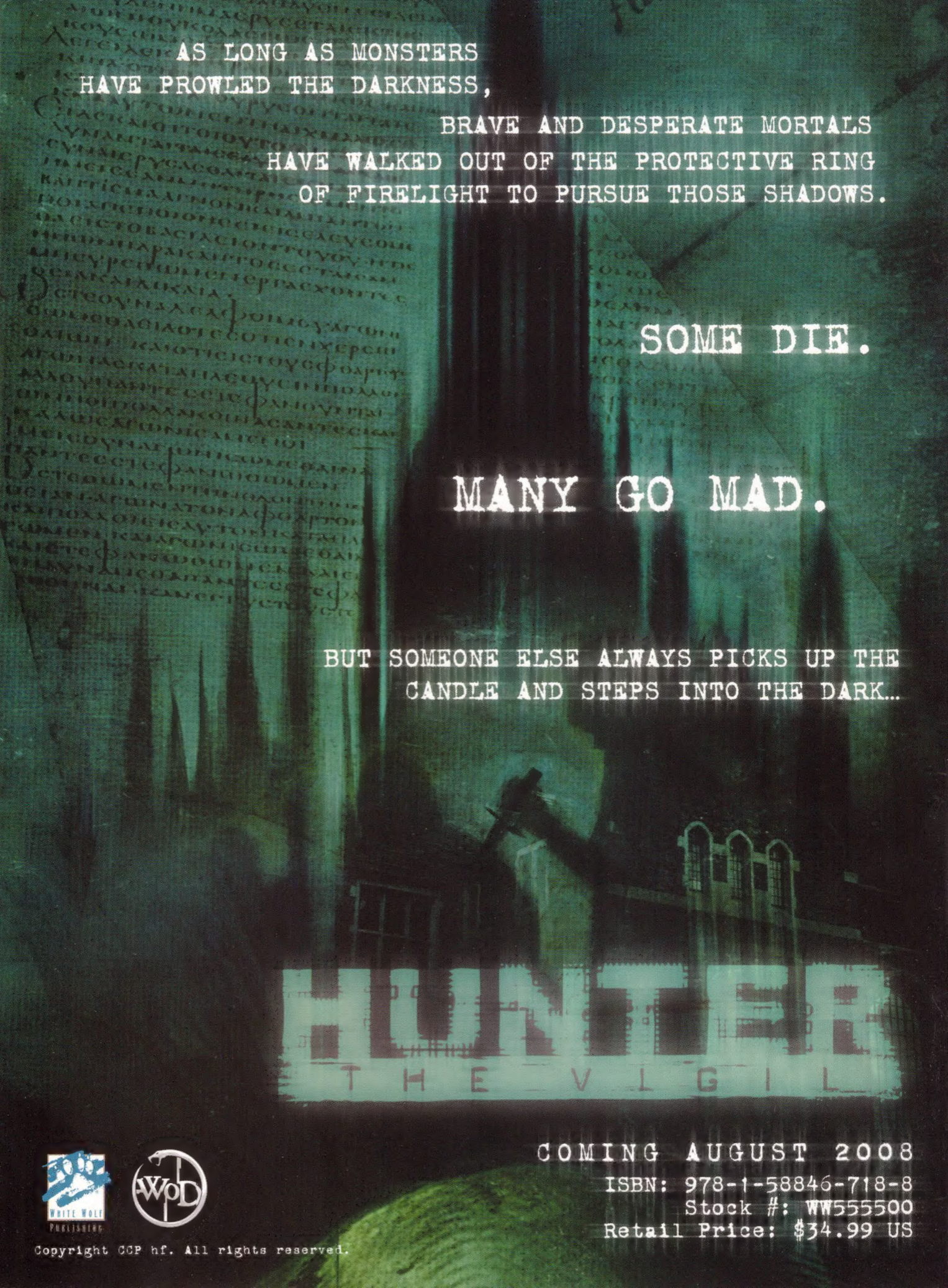
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